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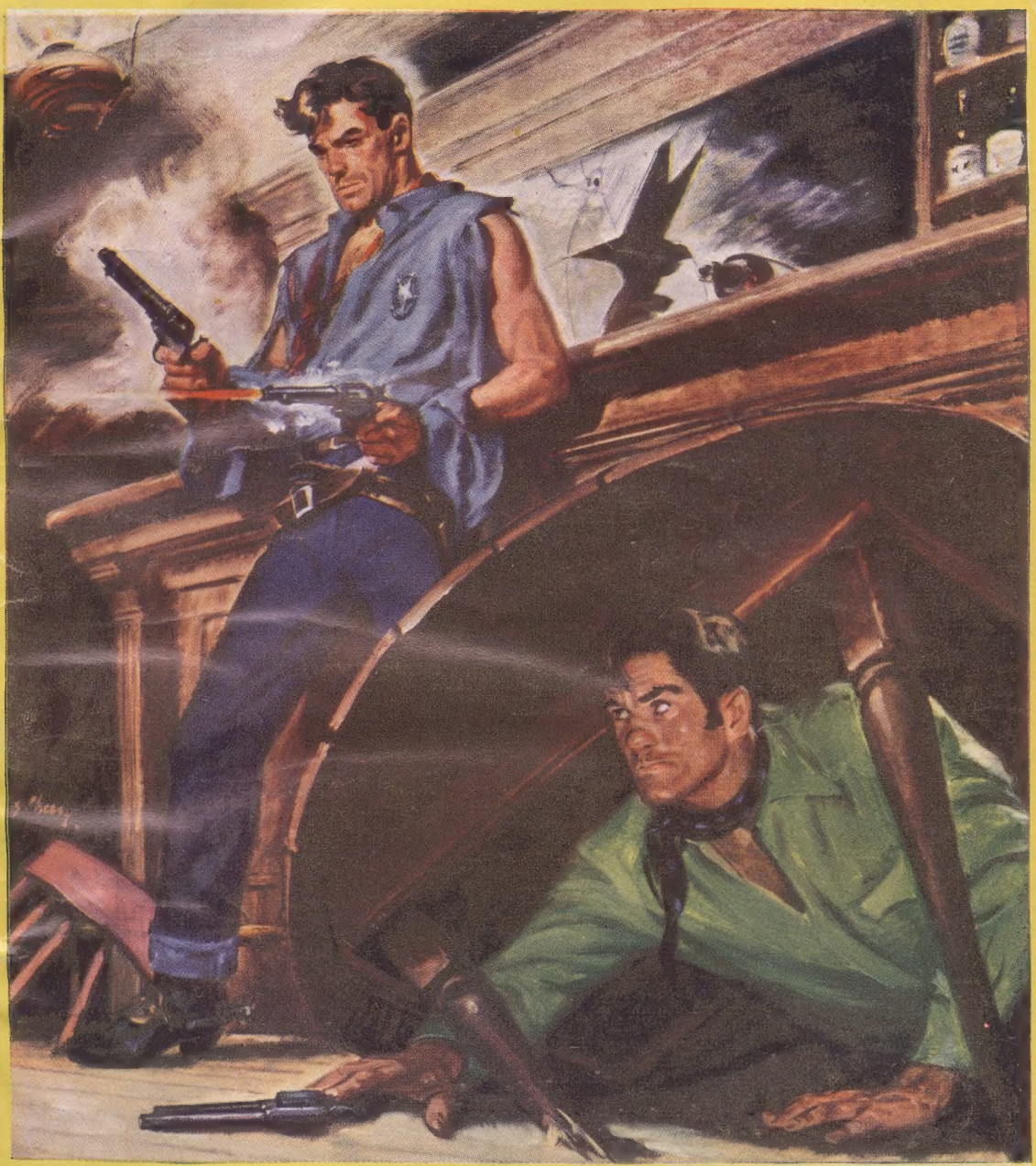
20¢

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

TEXAS RANGERS

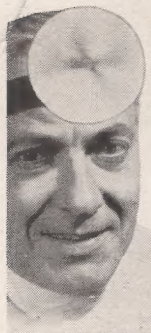
AND



FEATURING: **TIN-STAR TARGET**

A GUN-SWIFT JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

MIRACLE MEDICAL DISCOVERY BY FAMOUS SKIN DOCTOR GROWS HAIR ON BALD HEADS



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90% of all cases of baldness can be benefitted — according to famous medical authorities

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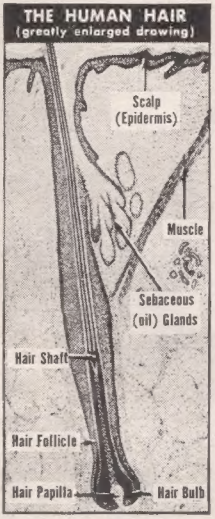
Some hairfall is normal. But abnormal amounts of falling hair are *nature's warning signal of approaching baldness.* Save your hair now while there is still time on our —

SATISFACTION OR MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE!

Use the formula (KEMPOR) that has been the noted skin doctor's closely guarded secret — tested and proved in his private practice!



Used successfully in his private practice on patients in all walks of life—now, for the first time this doctor's amazing formula is available for home use!

CLINICALLY TESTED AND PROVED — GUARANTEED ABSOLUTELY SAFE AND HARMLESS! Formula Used by Many Doctors Themselves!

At Last! A Way to End the Curse of Baldness!

Do you suffer the shame and embarrassment of excessive falling hair, bald spots, dandruff scales, itchy scalp? Is premature baldness making you look old before your time, robbing you of your rightful share of life and love? Does your bald head make you look too old for that better job, that bigger pay check?

Remarkable Hair Growth formula Discovered by Noted Dermatologist Brings New Hope for Bald Heads!

No sticky grease—no muss or fuss! So easy and simple to use—takes just a minute or two a day! Guaranteed absolutely safe—even for youngsters! This revolutionary scientific formula, KEMPOR, is absolutely different and unlike any other hair and scalp product on the market.

It is based on a lifetime of actual medical practice, by one of America's leading skin specialists. KEMPOR, penetrates deep into the scalp to loosen and float away undesirable material that clogs the hair canal. The KEMPOR, Formula feeds and stimulates the roots, frees the hair to come up unhindered. KEMPOR'S antiseptic action cleanses the scalp, attacks infections that may lead to serious results if ignored.

Here are just a few of the actual case histories in the files of the noted skin doctor, discoverer of the KEMPOR Formula.

(NOTE: Since these cases were taken from the Doctor's private files, actual names have not been used, and pictures of professional models have been substituted to assure privacy to actual patients described.)

CASE 645 Physician, 45
Symptoms: Dry, irritated scalp. Excessive hair loss.
Result: "Excessive hair loss ceased entirely. *New hair growth replaced those which were formerly lost.*"

CASE 847 Housewife, 42
Symptoms: Considerable loss of hair *following permanent.* Hair came out in handfuls.
Result: *Hair loss ceased. A complete regrowth of hair occurred later!*

CASE 1206 Druggist, 26
Symptoms: *"Hereditary" premature baldness. Father largely bald at 25 years of age.*
Result: Scalp and hair clean. *No further unnatural hair loss since start of treatment.*

ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES!

Only KEMPOR is the perfected formula of the famous scalp and hair doctor who made this revolutionary scientific discovery!

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Use the KEMPOR Formula for just 14 days, according to simple directions enclosed with package. If, at the end of 14 days you are not completely satisfied that KEMPOR is everything, does everything we claim—return the unused portion—*and your full purchase price will be refunded!* You are the sole judge!

Guardian Pharmacal Corporation

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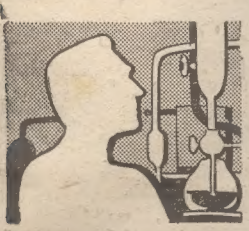

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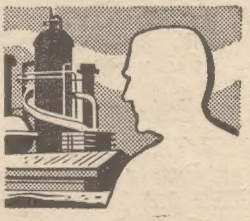

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 45, No. 1 DECEMBER, 1951

A New Jim Hatfield Novel

TIN-STAR TARGET.....Jackson Cole 10
When the Socorro Kid crosses the Rio with a cargo of phory cash, a fighting Ranger hears a call to action

Four New Short Stories

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Carl Benton pits himself against Antell's hired guns
ROSES BLOOM IN UNCOMPAHGRE.....Noel Loomis 94
Newspaperman Hall has a weapon that guns cannot beat
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The whole town was scared—except the little barber!

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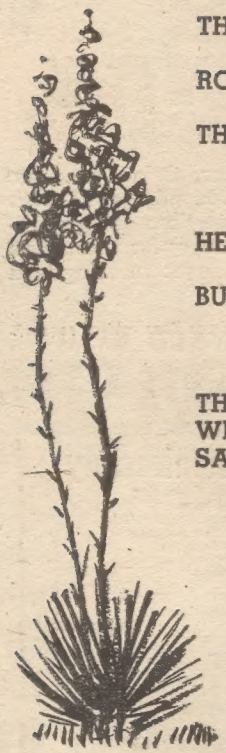
SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*



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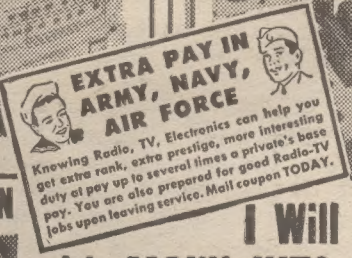

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In 1946 only 6,000 TV sets sold. In 1950 over 5,000,000. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets will be in use, according to estimates. Over 100 TV Stations are operating in 35 states. Authorities predict there will be 1,000 TV Stations. This means new jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

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Strange Facts About Land Values

BURIED away in the official records of land titles are real life stories harder to believe than the wildest fiction.

One time, when poking around for a title deed to a small lot, I found that the tract on which it stood, once a huge Spanish grant, had been swapped by the original owner for a silver mounted bridle. Not only that, but a poor boy who did odd chores in the neighborhood turned out to be a great grandson of that first owner.

Another time, in dull, dry records, I found that a large and extremely valuable portion of a thriving Western city had been sold at auction to satisfy a $400 grocery bill.

"No Chickens!"

On still another occasion a flaw in a title turned up when a chicken rancher bought a small acreage and found it clouded by an old restriction that said—no chickens! The acreage had been a real estate boomtown some years before, though no vestige of a town remained. A title searcher turned up the interesting fact that the forgotten town had been moved away overnight, lock, stock and water barrel, to foil a foreclosing Sheriff!

We think of land as about the most substantial and immovable possession. Actually, a lot of the earth's crust is in slow but continual movement. Seacoasts are either receding or extending beyond the recorded tideline. Parts of the Pacific Coast are creeping northward, according to scientists who study that sort of thing. In the course of time, such changes will be a headache for surveyors and for landowners, too.

Earthquakes occasionally "stretch" or "shrink" a parcel of valuable and carefully surveyed real estate. That makes a haywire mess of boundaries. And a windfall for picayunish lawyers. Such mixups followed the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, I'm told. I have seen land cracked open, like a dropped watermelon, down in the desert Southwest, with fissures as wide as three feet. Such pranks of Nature throw established landmarks way out of line.

Just a few years ago, fishermen on the California side of the lower Colorado River were plenty burned up when an Arizona game warden showed up and demanded to see their angling licenses.

The warden was able to prove, more or less, that he was acting within his legal rights and performing his rightful duty, because the river channel had changed, leaving a small hunk of Arizona on the California side! The same sort of thing happened at El Paso, where the Rio Grande meandered, so that a fragment of Mexico lay on the north bank.

In the course of expanding population, when large tracts of cheap land are cut up into small, valuable pieces, a lot of inequities bob up that have to be settled one way or another. Oil wells that slant under adjoining property cause heaps of ruckus from Texas west. Water wells also create legal riddles right often. I know of two towns, dependent on wells for their domestic supply, that agreed on a ridge that formed a watershed as their boundary.

One town drilled a big producing well close to that boundary which lowered the other town's supply. It was then found that the ridge wasn't perpendicular. The subterranean formation angled sharply, so that the productive well had actually tapped a water-bearing stratum that flowed to the yonder side. Geologists and lawyers are still kicking that problem around.

Public Domain

Back in the days of wide, open spaces, when land was free for whoever was powerful enough to claim and hold it, such petty wrangles didn't happen. That's what old-timers will tell you. The truth is, an enormous lot of the West is still public domain, undeveloped and unaffected by the compli-

cations following private ownership. It surprised Congress not long ago when a Washington representative dug up figures to show that Uncle Sam owns roughly one-fourth of the United States!

His figures show that we're still a pioneer nation, and in bad need of a land policy that will put that enormous area to good use.

Here are some of the figures:

The federal government owns 711,166 acres, which is roughly the area of western Europe. Fitted together, it would form a block 860 miles square. Most of this wealth of land is in the West, naturally. More than half of 10 Western States are government land—54 percent. Nearly all of Nevada is Uncle Sam land—about 85 percent. Even heavily populated California is 45 percent federal-owned, untaxable and therefor places the tax burden on the 55 percent that is owned and used by private individuals.

How are these federal landholdings administrated? By 40 different agencies, 16 of which manage timberlands, even more than have a say about grazing lands.

Save and Have

During Theodore Roosevelt's time, the policy of conservation of natural resources was started. The backbone of that policy was to set aside immense areas of land for the use or enjoyment of future citizens. The U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service came into being under this policy.

Ever since, selfish interests have been hammering away at this saving policy, with the argument that there should be "an orderly disposal" of unused land. If they had their way unhindered, our national forests would be thrown wide open to unlimited logging and our national shrines, the National Parks, would be lost to the people. Various efforts in the past 50 years have been made to harness the steam power of Yellowstone's geysers and Yosemite's waterfalls.

Strange inconsistencies remain in management of our land and its resources. On the Olympic Peninsula in Washington is a lake about two miles wide. One side is National Forest. The other shore is National Park.

If you kill a cougar on the forest side, you get a $75 bounty, for helping to conserve wildlife. If you kill the cougar on the park side, you get fined for destroying wildlife!

That illustration shows what a problem it is to figure the best way to manage the wilderness for the good of all.

Are YOU In This Picture ?

So many people think it is their fate to struggle through life, barely making ends meet, and having discontent and turmoil surround their every effort. You are possibly one of these.

But right here and now we want to say to you that THESE CONDITIONS ARE NOT PART OF YOUR NATURAL HERITAGE! Do you think that SUCCESS, PEACE, and MATERIAL ABUNDANCE are only for the other fellow—not you? Don't you think you have the opportunity to CHOOSE WHICH PATH WILL LEAD YOU TO OVERCOMING VICTORY?

If you think for one minute that you are doomed to disappointment the rest of your life, GET RID OF THESE THOUGHTS, FOR SUCH NEED NOT BE THE CASE! For if you mean business, and are willing to accept that which you should have, we have a wonderful message for you!

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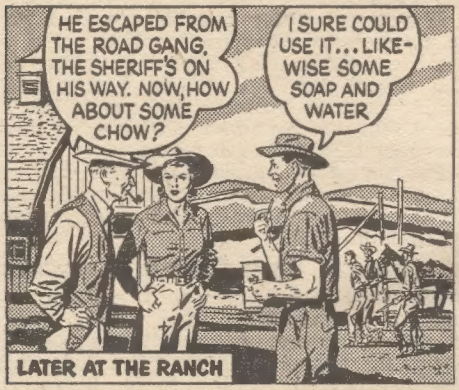
ECHOING UP A NEARBY DRAW, HER CRY REACHES A YOUNG GEOLOGIST


HE ESCAPED FROM THE ROAD GANG. THE SHERIFF'S ON HIS WAY. NOW, HOW ABOUT SOME CHOW?
I SURE COULD USE IT... LIKE-WISE SOME SOAP AND WATER
LATER AT THE RANCH

WHEN IT COMES TO SHAVING QUICKLY AND EASILY AT A SAVING, YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES. THEY FAR OUTSELL ALL OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES BECAUSE THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, SO THEY NEVER NICK OR SCRAPE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
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TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

When a relief column of U. S. cavalrymen reached the Little Big Horn in June, 1876, the only living thing left of Gen. Custer's five troops was a wounded buckskin horse named Comanche.

Time changes things. Recently at El Reno, Okla., the American Indian Exposition, composed of Kiowas, Comanches, Apaches and other tribes from the plains, sold three buffalo to buy cow beef for their annual powwow.

At a recent Reno, Nev., baseball game, three bison bulls charged the bleachers and police had to come to the rescue.

Cowboy Star Randolph Scott once played end for the Georgia Tech football team.

Phoenix is the only city in Arizona that has street cars.

A 100-year-old timepiece still keeps accurate time at San Ignacio, Texas. It's the sun dial set atop the north entrance to a famous old Border Indian fort. An early settler, Jose Villarreal, made the sun dial, gauging it to the Mexican time of 1851, and consequently it stays 36 minutes behind today's Central Standard Time. In summer the sun dial tells time from the north. In the morning the pointer casts its shadow on the right side of the face to indicate the hour. In the afternoon the shadow is on the left side. In the winter one must look at the pointer from the south side.

Arches National Monument, in southeastern Utah, contains more natural stone arches, windows, spires and pinnacles than any other section of the United States.

Fossils of the three-toed horse, the sabertooth tiger, and ancestors of the rhinoceros and the camel have been found in the South Dakota badlands.

The Colt revolver Doris Day uses for a comedy sequence in the movie, "On Moonlight Bay," belonged to Jesse James. Director LeRoy Prinz received it from his grandfather, who used to cut Jesse James' hair in St. Joseph, Mo.

Since Texarkana is both in Texas and Arkansas, mail just addressed to Texarkana, U. S. A., gets there.

Owen Jones, pioneer postman of Brigham City, Utah, never saw the town, though he delivered the mail to its residents for 25 years—he was blind.

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY JACKSON COLE

TIN-STAR

When the Socorro Kid crosses the Rio Grande with a cargo of phony cash, a fighting Ranger hears a call to action!

TARGET

CHAPTER I

Fort Pecos Murder

SOMETHING was delaying the troop train standing on the night-shrouded Rio Vista siding. The cavalry replacements for Fort Pecos, their mounts, and their equipment had been loaded for hours. The harrassed conductor winced as he entered a smoke-fouled day-coach and saw the girl with the copper hair beckoning to him.

"You very kindly invited me to board your train," she scolded him with a severity which was belied by the twinkle in her blue eyes, "so I wouldn't have to wait overnight here and catch tomorrow's train for the Fort. Yet here I sit, instead of in a comfortable hotel room. What's the delay?"

The girl aimed her rifle at the Ranger

The conductor consulted his turnip watch, thankful that the blue-coated soldiers who jammed this car were mostly asleep.

"I'm sorry, miss," he apologized, "but the dispatcher has orders to hold the train until a Texas Ranger gets aboard."

The girl smiled archly. When she had accepted the conductor's invitation to board this troop car, her beauty had made her the cynosure of all eyes. But she had maintained a rigid aloofness, going so far as to strip the glove from her left hand so that the most amorous trooper would see her diamond ring.

"You mean the Army would put itself out for a Ranger?" the girl chided. "Who is he—an ex-general or something?"

The conductor mopped his florid face with a jumper sleeve. He had no idea who this young woman was; only that he had overheard her telling the Rio Vista station agent that she had missed the Fort Pecos train. She was around twenty, and strikingly pretty. And any woman, especially a pretty one, was a novelty down here on the Big Bend frontier of southwest Texas.

"This Ranger ain't exactly a general, ma'am," the railroader said, "but he's just as important. Jim Hatfield—you've heard of him, of course. Seems the U.S. Border Patrol captured a smuggler fordin' the Rio

Grande with a lot of counterfeit money. Patrol notified the State capitol, and Austin, as an accommodation to the Feds, sent their tophand Ranger who knew the country and the criminals infesting it—better than ten other men—down to pick up the smuggler, the Socorro Kid. And the Gov'ment has authority to hold up a troop train for Hatfield, if it wants to."

The girl in gray lost some of her annoyance now. Jim Hatfield—the celebrated Lone Wolf Ranger—was a familiar name to her. And the Socorro Kid, as elusive a criminal as ever hopped the Border with a shipment of contraband, enjoyed a grim notoriety in his own right which had not escaped even her.

"Hatfield or not, I wish he'd hurry up and bring his prisoner aboard!" she commented tartly. "I had planned to ride on home after we reached the Fort, but now I'll be so late I'll have to impose on the sutler's wife at the post."

THE conductor began sweating anew. After all, he had violated both Army and railroad regulations by inviting this young woman to make her journey on this troop car. He was an old fool, letting a pretty smile influence him.

"I'm sure sorry, lady," he repeated. "Settin' on this sidetrack is as boring to me as— Wait a minute! Here's Ranger Hatfield now. We'll hit the high iron in a couple of shakes."

A draft of air, rank with the smell of the Rio Vista stockyards and the rotting mud of the Rio Grande bottoms, swept into the coach as the rear door was opened. Twisting around in her seat to relieve her feminine curiosity, the girl saw two men, of similar build and wearing rangeland garb, coming down the aisle.

As she turned back quickly, the girl heard one of the men speak to the conductor in a voice pitched low so as not to rouse the sleeping troopers:

"You can highball now, Joe. Sorry to have delayed you, but Captain Linklater kept me waitin' over at the Border Patrol headquarters."

The conductor hurried out of the coach to signal the engineer. The girl heard Jim Hatfield and the other man whom she knew must be the Ranger's prisoner—the Socorro Kid—working their way slowly along the aisle. It was cluttered with the sheathed sabers and field packs of the cavalrymen. When they reached the vacant seat reserved for their use it proved to be the one immediately opposite her own.

The girl pretended to be asleep, but through slitted lids she watched the two men seat themselves. Lamplight glinted on the iron handcuffs linking them wrist to wrist.

Which was the lawman and which the outlaw? The puzzle intrigued the girl. Both men wore jumper coats against the chill of the night, so there was no way to tell which wore guns. Jim Hatfield's Ranger star was not in sight. Except for the handcuffs, these two could have been friends traveling together. Brothers, almost; their coloring and physiques were that similar.

It was tantalizing, being this close to two of the most talked-of men in the West, and not be able to identify them, on account of their identical flat-crowned Stetsons, spurred cowboots, and batwing chaps.

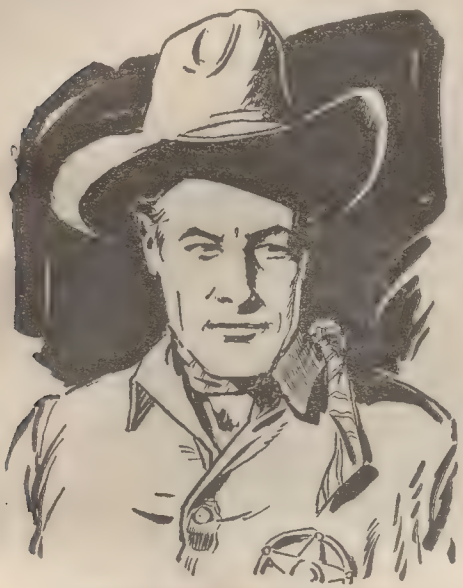
Outside a train's bell started clanging. There was a jerk and a clatter of drawbars and coupling jaws as the hoghead took up the slack. Outside the bleak Texas landscape began to slide past as the troop train picked up speed, its trucks rumbling over switch frogs as it hit the spur line snaking off to the northeast, across the Big Bend's brooding malpais, in the direction of Fort Pecos, where this trainload of cavalry troopers would be stationed as replacements for the garrison there.

The girl gave up trying to guess which of the men facing her was Jim Hatfield

and which the Socorro Kid. If the Ranger unlocked the fetters which bound him to his prisoner she would know.

But as the minutes dragged by and both men settled down for the night journey, she decided that the famous Lone Wolf must have had strict orders to take no chances on the slippery Kid making a break for freedom. The fetters remained in place.

After all, the Socorro Kid was a prize.



TEXAS RANGER JIM HATFIELD

He had eluded lawmen for years. And from what frontier gossip she could remember, Jim Hatfield had been active in hunting the Kid over a long period of time.

The click of wheels over rail joints lulled the young woman to sleep like a sedative would have done.

Had she remained awake a few moments longer she would have had a valid clue as to which man was which, hunter or hunted. For the husky dark-haired man seated next to the aisle began snoring peacefully. His companion remained vigilantly awake, and when he unbuttoned his coat the light touched the big buckles of the double gun harness he wore.

JIM HATFIELD, Texas Ranger, could not risk going to sleep. That was a luxury he envied the Socorro Kid.

Hatfield cuffed his gray Stetson back to reveal a shock of raven-dark hair. His eyes, of a peculiar greenish-blue shade, were soft with the run of his own thoughts now.

After all the years he had sought to place the Socorro Kid under arrest as a Border-hopper, it was anti-climactic that he had had no direct part in capturing the outlaw.

Captain Isham Linklater's hard-working U.S. Border Patrol guards had done that, catching the Kid red-handed in the act of fording the Rio Grande a few miles downstream from Rio Vista. When captured, he had been carrying a fortune in counterfeit greenbacks rolled up in his saddle slicker.

Of course, this Socorro Kid was only a delivery boy, a cog in the smuggling machine which over a period of ten years had been flooding the Lone Star State with 'dobe dollars, alien Chinese, narcotics, and other contraband. Cracking that smuggling ring had long been a crusade of the Texas Rangers, and Jim Hatfield had been the most active Ranger on that crusade.

For that reason, when the word was flashed to the State Capitol in Austin that the Socorro Kid was at last in American custody, Jim Hatfield had been chosen by Ranger headquarters as the lawman to pick up the prisoner from Captain Linklater.

Linklater had been frankly skeptical about turning such a dangerous prisoner over to a single Ranger, even a Ranger of Jim Hatfield's Border-wide reputation. It had been this reluctance which had accounted for Hatfield's delay in boarding the Fort Pecos troop train this evening.

"Captain McDowell may think you are

worth a whole company of Rangers," Linklater had admitted caustically, "but I'd feel safer sending a Border Patrolman along as your bodyguard."

As the train rumbled on, Hatfield found it increasingly difficult to remain wide awake. He glanced around for something to keep his mind off sleep.

The glint of the Tiffany-cut diamond on the girl's engagement ring caught his eye, and he speculated idly on who this strikingly pretty young woman might be. The fiancée of a junior officer at Fort Pecos probably, or perhaps a ranch girl, judging from her healthy outdoor tan.

Hatfield dismissed the girl from his thoughts, feeling, as he always felt in the presence of a beautiful woman, his own lonely lot in life. A man who wore a Ranger badge had no room in his life for romance. Rangers rubbed shoulders with danger continually. They lived on borrowed time, and knew it.

His thoughts ranged ahead to Fort Pecos, hoping that his delay in catching this troop train would not make him miss connections with the through passenger express from California which would take him on to Captain McDowell's headquarters.

Goldy, his sorrel stallion, was in a cavalry stock car up ahead. McDowell's telegram ordering him to report to Rio Vista and pick up the Socorro Kid from the Border Patrolmen had reached him at Marfa, where he was working on another case. His superior's message had read:

THIS IS OUR CHANCE TO CRACK THE TRAFFIC OF THE BIG BEND SMUGGLING RING. RIDE CLOSE HERD ON THE SOCORRO KID. THE GANG IS A BIG ONE, WITH MEMBERS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE RIO GRANDE. AN ATTEMPT MAY BE MADE TO RESCUE HIM EN ROUTE TO AUSTIN. THAT IS WHY I CHOSE YOU TO BRING HIM IN.

Hatfield thought comfortably, "I'm safe enough on this troop train, anyway. Mighty decent of the Army to provide this transportation as far as the Fort, even though the Rangers are sort of accommodatin' the Border Patrol."

At his elbow, the Socorro Kid was snoring. Again Hatfield envied the outlaw his chance to snatch a cat-nap. Such a luxury would be denied the Ranger himself until late tomorrow when he had remanded his prisoner to the custody of a U.S. Marshal in Austin.

THE miles slipped away as the troop train thundered through the night. It was twenty minutes to one by Hatfield's watch when he heard the engine whistle and saw the twinkling lights of Fort Pecos reflected on the river ahead.

The girl in the gray suit was sound asleep, her body leaning against the collection of packages she had apparently picked up on a shopping trip to Rio Vista. Hatfield could not remember ever having seen a face as lovely as hers, relaxed in sleep as it was.

The Ranger jerked his shackled wrist to wake up the Socorro Kid. The outlaw roused with a grunt and muttered something in Spanish.

"Come on, Kid. We want to be the first off this rattler."

The smuggler made no protest as Hatfield led him down the aisle, stumbling over the sheathed sabers and field packs of the drowsing troopers. As Hatfield opened the car door and moved out onto the rear platform of the coach, a burly sergeant blew a blast on his whistle to rouse his platoon.

The town, built on the flats below the river, was wheeling past as the troop train was shunted off the main line onto a siding. As the train ground to a halt, Hatfield saw a group of officers from the stockaded Army post up on the bluff waiting on the station platform to take charge of the replacements.

Alighting from the train with his prisoner in tow, Jim Hatfield sized up the civilians waiting at the dingy station. Chap-clad bronc stompers, a blanketed Indian buck, railroad employes. A stoop-shouldered man wearing a gambler's black coat.

The news that the Socorro Kid was a passenger on this train had had ample

time to reach Fort Pecos. Any one of the men waiting in the shadows for the Rio Vista train to arrive might be carrying a gun with which to cut Hatfield down.

As troopers began piling out of the coaches the night was alive with bugle calls, non-coms' shouts, the thud of boots. Through this confusion Hatfield made his way to the station agent, identified himself and left orders for Goldy, his horse, to be stabled at State expense until the sorrel could be loaded on an Austin-bound stock train tomorrow.

That accomplished, Hatfield asked for instructions as to how to reach the Overland & Border Railroad station. He was relieved to learn that the passenger express for Austin had not yet arrived. For after this one there would not be another train for two days.

To reach the other railroad station entailed a short-cut past the Fort Pecos remount corrals. Hatfield's last glimpse of the troop train sidetrack showed him the attractive red-haired girl in earnest conference with a young cavalry captain from the Fort. Her future husband, no doubt.

Heading down the inky gut of an alley flanking the stock yards, Hatfield became aware of a strange sensation that he and his prisoner were being followed. The thought grew in him as he and the Socorro Kid strode rapidly through the star-dusted night toward the O & B station on the far side of town.

Hatfield was not a superstitious man, but he had lived close to Death for too long to ignore his hunches. That prescience of danger flanking him in the night grew in the Lone Wolf, and accounted for the strange thing he did.

Unpinning the Ranger's tin star from his shirt, Hatfield attached it to the greasy front of the Socorro Kid's jumper coat. In the darkness, the smuggler was not aware of what had been done, or why.

Leaving the foul-smelling remount yards, the lawman and the outlaw headed down another alley behind a row of honky-tonks. Light from a billiard parlor's windows threw its yellow splash across the alley. There was no avoiding it.

For a moment the two men, handcuffed together, stood out in bold relief as they passed the lighted area. Eyes squeezed against that glare, Hatfield was not sure whether or not he had seen a blur of movement in the further blackness until that clotted dark was stabbed by the bore-flame of an exploding gun.

At the same second, the Lone Wolf Ranger heard an exultant grunt from the Kid.

Instinctively Hatfield hurled himself into the outer darkness and plunged groundward, clawing a six-gun from his right-hand holster. Subconsciously he was aware that the Socorro Kid had fallen with him—but slack-jointed and limp, not diving to the ground of his own volition.

Then the Lone Wolf Ranger saw the glint of window light on the thick rivulet of ruby blood which was seeping from the bullet-hole in the Socorro Kid's chest, blood which was turning the silver law badge to crimson.

Hatfield's prisoner was dead, an ambush bullet in his heart. And from the Stygian gloom of the alley up ahead, a hoarse voice was calling:

"Kid! Socorro Kid!"

CHAPTER II

Bushwhacker

BOOTS were slogging toward the prone pair in the dirt. In seconds Hatfield knew he would have the Kid's slayer in his own gunsights, a pat target for a point-blank bullet.

But he did not cock the gun in his fist. He was thinking;

"Whoever the killer is, he didn't know the Socorro Kid, or my switchin' the Ranger star wouldn't have fooled him. And whoever he is, he has some connection with this smugglin' ring Captain McDowell wants smashed."

More than once in his career, Hatfield had made a snap decision in the pressure of an instant's emergency. His mind

worked fast now, setting the scene for this bushwhacker to see.

Unbuckling his double gun harness, the Ranger hurled cartridge belts and holsters into the darkness. Then he jammed his own six-gun through the belt of the dead man's chaps.

The killer was moving up rapidly through the murk of the alley now, the dim light from the honky showing Hatfield the white expanse of a boiled shirt bracketed by the lapels of a black broadcloth coat.

He recognized that man as the man in gambler's dress who had been waiting at the station for the troop train to arrive. The man had probably overheard Hatfield's inquiry at the depot office and had hurried on ahead to waylay him and the Socorro Kid on their way to the Overland & Border station.

Keeping out of the light, Hatfield knelt beside the dead man as the black-coated bushwhacker came to a halt beside the Socorro Kid's corpse. The killer, reloading his Colt .44, thrust it quickly out of sight in an armpit holster.

"Plugged him with your first shot," Hatfield grunted in a hoarse whisper. "*Muy bueno.*" The Socorro Kid was a half-breed, therefore the Spanish idiom was in character.

The killer sucked in a deep breath. He was a cadaverous-faced man with fish-belly-white hands. His string cravat, black Keevil hat and striped Marseilles pants branded him as a typical card sharp.

"I'm glad to get this over with," the killer whispered with obvious relief. "Got the boss' telegram only forty minutes before your train pulled in. Couldn't tell at the station which of you was Hatfield. But when I outflanked you and saw his star—You got the key to that Ranger's handcuffs, Kid?"

Hatfield pretended to rummage in the Socorro Kid's pockets.

"Here's the key," he grunted. "Did the boss leave any orders for what I'm to do next?"

He had not addressed the ambusher by name, but the man did not appear to notice that. Whoever he was, this man was obviously in the pay of the smuggling ring, and therefore might be known by name, at least, to the Socorro Kid.

"No, he didn't mention any orders," the killer said. "I supposed you and him had gone over the details before you let the Border Patrol catch you. Anyhow, the trap worked. It sucked Jim Hatfield into the range of my gun."

The darkness concealed Hatfield's sharp change of expression. So the Socorro Kid's capture had been part of a plot designed to bait the Lone Wolf Ranger into a trap! He recalled his own surprise at the ease with which the Kid had been apprehended, swimming the Rio Grande directly below a Border Patrol guardhouse.

"It worked, all right," Hatfield muttered, imitating the Socorro Kid's voice. He unlocked the bracelet from his wrist and stood up, careful to keep out of the light where this gunman could see his face. "For me, it was a mite too risky."

The killer rubbed his clean-shaven, clay-blue jaw with a pallid hand. He was still staring with morbid fascination at the man he had shot.

"I don't know what to do next," Hatfield said nervously.

"In that case, Kid," the man muttered, "the best thing for you to do would be to rattle your hocks over to the Lazy Ladder Ranch and report direct to Curt McInlay. You can lie low until the boss comes up with that shipment next week, maybe go back to Rio Vista with him."

A FILM of cool moisture rimed Hatfield's cheeks. It was in his power to jab a gun in this killer's ribs, force him to reveal the identity of the mysterious "boss" to whom he kept referring. But the man's allusion to a ranch called the Lazy Ladder, and a receiver of contraband goods named Curt McInley, told the Ranger that he would be foolish to tip his hand to this small cog in the smuggling machine. He must play for higher stakes.

"I'm Jake Crespin," the ambusher went on. "I run the faro bank at the Index Saloon here in town. You can tell McInlay

The lone smuggler began carrying away the metal boxes

I sent you out to the ranch, seeing as how McInlay don't know you."

Relief caused Hatfield's cheeks to balloon out. Whatever he learned at the Lazy Ladder Ranch, at least he had something definite to go on—the name and profession of this man who had been notified by telegraph to kill Jim Hatfield en route through Fort Pecos tonight.

"Thanks, Crespin," Hatfield whispered. "Now this Lazy Ladder—I'm sort of lost after dark. How do I—"

Crespin seemed eager to be gone. He said hoarsely, "Take the section line road due west out of town. The ranch is ten, twelve miles out. You'll see the red ladder hangin' from the main gate on the right-hand side of the road." The faro banker laid a shaking hand on Hatfield's sleeve. His voice took on a wheedling note. "You might tell McInlay how well I handled this job of cashin' Hatfield's chips tonight, Kid. The boss has the idea maybe I ain't so useful to the organization any more, ever since Sheriff Gorham caught me wearing a diamond stickpin that matched one which had been stole in Mexico and smuggled across the Rio."

Before Hatfield could answer, Jake Crespin had vanished into the night, his assignment completed. A back door of a saloon up ahead slammed, and then a sepulchral quiet invaded the alley.

Retrieving his gun-belts from the alley dirt, Hatfield buckled them on. Then he removed his money-belt, containing his Ranger credentials together with a hundred-odd dollars in expense money, and strapped it around the dead man's waist, under his shirt next to the skin.

The stage was set. At daylight, when this corpse was discovered and turned

over to the local coroner, the official report would be flashed to Austin that Captain McDowell's best Ranger had fallen a victim of foul play here in Fort Pecos.

Only one man in this town knew Hatfield intimately—Sheriff Fred Gorham, an ex-Ranger himself. And if Gorham viewed the Socorro Kid's remains, he could be relied upon to keep his mouth shut about the mistaken identity. Of that Hatfield was positive.

Off through the night, Hatfield heard the California Flyer whistle for the station, the train that was to have taken him on to Austin. But Jake Crespin's bullet had profoundly changed Hatfield's plans now.

He debated the advisability of telegraphing Captain McDowell's office that he was alive, and decided against such a course. After all, the Rio Vista smuggler boss had telegraphed his killing orders to Crespin, which meant there was a chance the local operator might be a traitor in the employ of the contraband ring.

"From the way Crespin talked, this McInlay hombre over at the Lazy Ladder Ranch didn't know the Socorro Kid," Hatfield muttered into the night. "If he did, or if anybody at the ranch knew the Kid, then I'm headin' straight for a nameless grave."

It was a risk, a grim, terrible risk. But the Lone Wolf had forged his reputation throughout Texas by taking the long chance, if it appeared to serve the welfare of the Lone Star State. Such a risk seemed justified now.

Retracing his steps toward the cattle pens along the river, Hatfield left the Socorro Kid sprawled where he had fallen, leaving his handcuffs notched to the dead man's wrists. The gamble seemed worth the risk. The smugglers had depended upon Crespin's bullet putting Hatfield out of the picture for keeps. Back in Rio Vista, the unknown chief of the contraband ring would no doubt be waiting for Crespin's report of a successful bushwhack.

GETTING out to the Lazy Ladder, west of town, was Hatfield's immediate objective. Obviously, Crespin had expected the Socorro Kid to steal or rent a horse for the trip tonight.

But Hatfield preferred to have his own mount, Goldy.

Arriving at the branch line railroad depot, Hatfield was in time to see the cavalrymen, mounted now, heading off along the bluff road to the fort in a column of twos.

The station platform was deserted. He saw no trace of the red-haired girl from the day-coach.

The station agent was locking up for the night. Recognizing Hatfield, he did not appear to notice the fact that the Ranger's tin star was missing.

"Decided I'd pick up my sorrel," Hatfield said. "If you'll tell me where he's stabled—"

The railroad agent gestured off toward town.

"Sure. I sent him over to the Sam Houston Livery on E Street. Two blocks over. Prime lookin' bronc."

Hatfield hurried away in the direction the agent had indicated. It did not matter particularly that the railroad employe had recognized him. When the news of "Jim Hatfield's death broke tomorrow, the station man would assume that he met it on the way to the stable, if he gave it any thought at all.

Arriving at the Sam Houston Livery, Hatfield found the hostler sound asleep on a cot beside the barn's archway. A whicker from Goldy directed him down the runway between the stalls.

Five minutes later Hatfield was leading his big stallion out into the night, saddled and bridled.

The stable tender would think someone had stolen the Ranger's horse. That would add to the confusion tomorrow.

In saddle, Hatfield crossed through town by obscure side streets, swung north until he hit the main-traveled section line road, then turned due west.

Confused thoughts milled in the Ranger's head. This might easily become a one-way road to doom, so far as he was concerned. If he ran into a death trap at the

Lazy Ladder, Roaring Bill McDowell, his chief back in Austin, would never know the truth of what happened to him.

It was doubtful if the local coroner would ship the Socorro Kid's remains to Austin. More likely he would bury the dead outlaw in the local Boot Hill and mail Hatfield's wallet and Ranger star to headquarters in the Texas capitol.

On the other hand, this trail leading to the Lazy Ladder cattle outfit might prove to be the thin entering wedge which would lead to the wiping out of the Big Bend smuggling ring. In some way this ranch, a hundred miles from the Rio Grande, was a link in the underground smuggling traffic.

As a Ranger, it was Hatfield's business to have a thorough knowledge of every brand in the Texas register. Cudgeling his memory now as Goldy flung back the prairie miles, Hatfield believed he had a line on the Lazy Ladder.

If memory served him right, the ranch was owned by a former Colonel of Jeb Stuart's volunteer cavalry, Jeff Ashton. Ashton's name was respected throughout the trans-Pecos area of Texas. Did Ashton have secret connections with the Mexican contraband runners south of the Rio Grande?

It was up to Jim Hatfield, playing the rôle of the Socorro Kid, to find the answer to that riddle.

DAWN was a faint cerise pulse in the east when the young lawman caught sight of the huddle of barns, outbuildings and neat California-style ranch house off to the right of the county road.

The sun was lifting in fiery splendor over the Pecos bottoms behind him when the Lone Wolf reined his golden stallion to a halt alongside a rustic gateway, from the crossbar of which hung a red-painted ladder, horizontally placed.

A poplar-bordered lane perhaps a half mile in length led from this gateway to the ranch buildings.

This, then, was Colonel Ashton's spread, one of the largest working outfits in southwest Texas.

CHAPTER III

Lazy Ladder

CANTERING up the lane, with full daylight rapidly putting the details of the Lazy Ladder headquarters into vivid relief, Hatfield located the bunkhouse. A crowd of Texas cowpunchers were washing up for breakfast there, engaging in boisterous horseplay. Their ebullient good nature did not strike Hatfield as typical of men with any part in high crime.

And yet the Fort Pecos faro dealer's testimony could not be disputed. At least one man—Curt McInlay—was an accomplice of the smuggling ring, here on Lazy Ladder. And had not Jake Crespin stated that the boss himself was due here next week with a "shipment"?

Riding up to the bunkhouse, Hatfield was given the good-natured scrutiny of the Lazy Ladder range riders. They were hardy young Texans for the most part, with a sprinkling of Negros and Mexican *vaqueros.*

True to Western tradition, a cheery voice hailed the strange rider and invited him to set and cool his saddle. As Hatfield swung down from stirrups he heard the welcome music of the cook beating a wagon tire with an iron spoon, summoning the crew to breakfast in a nearby adobe-walled mess hall.

The foreman of the outfit, a tall, red-haired man in his middle forties, came out to the hitch-rack where Hatfield was tying up Goldy.

"Ridin' the grub line?" The ramrod grinned, sizing up the stranger's golden sorrel with a horseman's keen appreciation of a fine animal. "Or hankerin' for a ridin' job?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Either or both." He also grinned. "Lazy Ladder hirin' this late in the season?"

"Depends," the foreman temporized, running a hand over Goldy's sleek rump. "We could use a bronc stomper to work

the rough string," he said, eyes cool and shrewd.

Hatfield fell in step with the big foreman as they headed toward the cookshack.

"You got a puncher here named Curt McInlay, ain't you?" Hatfield asked casually.

The foreman came to a sudden halt, his granite-gray eyes surveying Hatfield with aroused attention. "How come you ask that? What's your name, by the way?"

Hatfield sensed he was skating on thin ice. He ignored the ramrod's first question by saying, "You can call me Hays. Jack Hays."

The foreman did not offer his hand. He said, "Jack Hays. That your real monicker?"

The Ranger returned the ramrod's steely glance.

"The brand will do, won't it? What does a man's pedigree have to do with gettin' a job on this spread?"

The foreman's mouth hardened. "I'm Curt McInlay," he said abruptly. "I run the outfit for Ashton. I do the hirin'."

Hatfield grinned again. The time had come to play his trump.

"That sorrel I rode out here," he said, "belonged to Jim Hatfield, the Ranger. Jake Crespin sent me out here, McInlay."

Surprise showed briefly on McInlay's face.

"Then you'll be the Socorro Kid."

McInlay, then, had known in advance of the trap Hatfield would step into upon reaching Fort Pecos with his prisoner, a prisoner who had sacrificed himself to bait that trap.

Lowering his voice to a conspiratorial monotone, Hatfield said evasively, "Better call me Jack Hays. Crespin said I could hole up here until the boss shows up with the shipment next week."

The last vestige of suspicion left McInlay's craggy face now. He said eagerly, "Crespin handle Jim Hatfield all right?"

The fake Socorro Kid grinned significantly. "Nailed him behind the Index Saloon with his first shot. The boss has got a good man in that card wrangler."

THE LAZY LADDER foreman linked his arm through Hatfield's and they resumed their walk toward the cookshack.

"We'll have to go through the motions of hirin' you, so the rest of the crew won't get to thinkin' somethin' is fishy," McInlay muttered. "After breakfast I'll take you over to Jeff's to sign the pay book. You'll do routine work around the spread till the boss shows up. Just act natural—and don't let the name Socorro Kid get past your lips, savvy? You're Jack Hays so far as the crew is concerned."

At breakfast, Hatfield had time to sort out his thoughts. McInlay had implied that some, if not all of Colonel Ashton's crew were innocent of any connection with the Rio Grande smuggling combine. That was good.

When the morning meal broke up, Hatfield hung around the cookshack shaping a cigarette while McInlay outlined the day's duties for the crew. McInlay made no effort to introduce his new rider to the rest of the bunch, which was in keeping with Hatfield's wishes. Time enough to start scouting later, when he had been accepted as another member of the Lazy Ladder bunch.

"We'll go over to the main house and sign you on," McInlay said, when he and Hatfield were on their way to Ashton's rambling tile-roofed home. "He won't ask any questions. Like I told you, I do all the hirin' and firin' on this outfit."

Hatfield curbed an impulse to inquire whether Colonel Ashton was one of the inner circle. But to expose too much ignorance of the smuggling ring's personnel at this stage of the desperate masquerade he was playing might prove fatal.

Following the foreman into the big living room of the Ashton ranchhouse, Hatfield crossed over to the archway leading into the adjacent dining room, an archway closed over now by sliding doors of fumed oak.

"Boss is at breakfast," McInlay muttered, halting before the sliding doors.

They could hear the clink of silver on chinaware, interrupted by a girl's voice:

"Hatfield's killing has the whole town

as excited as an upset beehive, Dad. They found him lying in the dust behind Saloon Row. That outlaw he was taking to Austin must have grabbed one of his guns and shot him in cold blood."

McInlay nudged Hatfield with his elbow, pausing in the act of rapping on the door panel as Jeff Ashton's deep bass voice reached them from the dining room:

"That ends the myth of Hatfield's indestructibility, Ellen. It had to happen sooner or later, I guess."

Ellen Ashton's voice came after a brief pause. "Of course it was a shock to me, having seen Hatfield at such close range in the very last hours of his life."

Curt McInlay swung startled eyes on Hatfield. In that moment, the Lone Wolf realized the stunning truth. Jeff Ashton's daughter was the red-haired girl he had seen last night in the Rio Vista troop train! And if she caught sight of him here on Lazy Ladder Ranch, his elaborate plan to wait here in the rôle of the Socorro Kid was doomed to exposure.

McInlay's whisper rasped against the Ranger's eardrums: "You know the boss' girl, Kid?"

Hatfield thought fast. Putting a finger to his lips to signal the foreman to be quiet, he tiptoed back across the living room, away from the dining room doorway.

McInlay followed him, scowling curiously.

"Ellen—that girl in there—rode up from Rio Vista to the Fort last night in the same coach as Hatfield and me," he told the foreman tensely. "She was in the seat right across from us. She got a good long look at both of us."

McInlay tugged his lower lip thoughtfully. Then, with a jerk of his head, he mentioned for the Ranger to follow him. This time, McInlay strode over to a closed door to the left of Ashton's huge lavarock fireplace.

OPENING the door, McInlay waited until Hatfield had gone into the room beyond. It was a room lined with well-

[*Turn page*]

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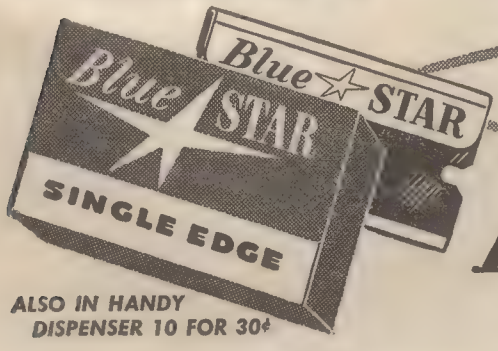

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filled bookshelves, its furniture consisting of a horsehide sofa and a large roll-top desk.

"The Colonel's private office," McInlay said in his natural voice. "You wait here. If the senorita spots you she'll jump to the conclusion it was you that 'gulched Jim Hatfield last night."

Hatfield nodded ruefully. McInlay did not know it, but he had given Ellen—although not necessarily her father—a clean bill of health so far as the smuggling activities of the Lazy Ladder ranch were concerned.

"I don't cotton to this set-up, McInlay," the Ranger said nervously. "If I'd known that redhead was the Colonel's daughter I wouldn't have come out here."

McInlay shrugged. "Ellen won't cross trails with you. I'll see to it that you're kept workin' away from the ranch daytimes. Where else could you hole up, this close to the Border? You leave this to me, Kid."

The ranch foreman left the office. Through the crack in the door, Hatfield saw McInlay cross the living room and rap discreetly on the sliding doors of the dining room.

Hatfield swung around, giving Ashton's office a quick once-over. It was the typical headquarters of a large working ranch, the desk covered with invoices and stud-horse bills and assorted brand books, Cattlemen's journals and ledgers.

Above the desk was a faded oil painting of General J. E. B. Stuart, Ashton's commanding officer in the War Between the States. The Stars and Bars of the Confederacy hung draped above an old-fashioned iron safe in one corner. It was a battle flag from Ashton's military past, judging from the bullet perforations in the fabric.

There was no time to examine closer the papers on Ashton's desk. Such a search would probably have availed Hatfield nothing in any account. If Ashton was the receiving end of the smuggling conspiracy he would hardly keep incriminating papers or contraband on the premises.

The door swung open and McInlay entered with a tall, white-haired old ex-soldier in cowpuncher garb, and carrying a brace of Spiller & Burr pistols at his thighs.

"Colonel Ashton, Jack Hays," the foreman introduced them. "I'm puttin' Hays on the pay-roll, Boss."

Colonel Ashton did not offer to shake hands. He strode over to his desk and sat down in a swivel chair, limping slightly as the result of an old war wound. He was a handsome old codger, well into his seventies, with eyes like steel chips and a snow-white mustache and goatee to match the buffalo mane of silver hair which flowed over his collar.

Pulling the ranch pay book from a drawer of his desk, Ashton swiveled around to size up Hatfield.

"Didn't know we were short-handed, Curt," he grunted caustically, without looking at his foreman.

Hatfield kept silent as the ramrod said deferentially, "Hays is a tumbleweed rider, Boss. Thought I'd let him fence in the water-hole at Sumidero Wells. He'll be driftin' yonderward in a week or so, and I can't spare any of the reg'lar crew for post-hole diggin'."

Ashton continued to size up Hatfield as if the Ranger were a bug impaled on a pin.

"Not a blue-nosed Yankee, are you, Hays?" gruffed the old Texan.

Hatfield grinned, flashing a look at McInlay. The foreman had turned his back, staring out the office window as he started building a smoke.

"Hardly a carpet-bagger, sir," the Lone Wolf chuckled. "Born and raised in Texas."

ASHTON snorted, handing Hatfield a stub of pencil and continuing to size up the new cowhand as the Ranger wrote "Jack Hays, Medora, Tex.," in the pay-roll book.

"I'm particular who I hire on this spread, Hays," Ashton rumbled, closing the book with a snap. "Your pay will be forty a month and found, not that your stripe will work on one place as long as a month."

"Yes sir," Hatfield said humbly.

The sound of the front door slamming reached their ears and Ashton limped over to the window, elbowed McInlay aside. He caught sight of his daughter descending the porch steps.

Quickly throwing up the window, Ashton bellowed after the girl: "Where you gallivantin' to, young lady?"

Looking past Ashton's shoulder, Jim Hatfield saw that Ellen had discarded her gray traveling suit in favor of a split leather riding skirt, a flat-crowned sombrero, and a rodeo shirt of apricot hue. In her native element, she looked even more beautiful than he remembered her.

"Why, I'm riding over to Jerry's, Dad," Ellen called back. "After all, I've been away almost a week, shopping for my trousseau. Don't you think I'm lonesome for my man?"

Ashton snorted in the rough-tempered way he had used in addressing Hatfield.

"You traipse back in here and pick up Jerry Preece's mail, Ellen. Be dogged if I'll spare a man to run R. F. D. service over to the Rafter P."

Hatfield and McInlay exchanged alarmed glances. A face-to-face meeting between Ellen Ashton and the "Socorro Kid" was the last thing either of them wanted.

CHAPTER IV

Working Orders

IT WAS too late now. The front door opened and as Hatfield heard the girl's cowboots rapping across the living room floor toward the door of her father's inner sanctum, the Ranger turned away, pretending to be studying the painting of Jeb Stuart on the opposite wall.

He was like that when Elllen entered the office, giving McInlay a gay "howdy." The girl cast an incurious glance at Jim Hatfield's back, then accepted the bundle of mail which her father fished from a desk pigeon-hole.

"All right, honey," Colonel Ashton said in a gentler voice. "Ride along now. Danged if I won't be glad when I've got you married off. One less mouth to feed."

Ellen kissed her father's cheek but, instead of turning to go, she swung her gaze back to Jim Hatfield, a puzzled frown putting a small notch between her brows.

There was an awkward pause. Curt McInlay surreptitiously rubbed the back of his neck with a bandanna. Colonel Ashton, noting the object of his daughter's attention, cleared his throat impatiently and blurted:

"All right, all right! Do you have to be introduced formally to every buckaroo I hire? Turn around, Hays, and meet my daughter. For a girl who aims to get married inside of two weeks, I'm teetotally damned if I know why she is so interested in every new man she sees around this spread."

A pulse hammered on the bronzed column of Jim Hatfield's throat as he turned reluctantly to meet the amused strike of Ellen Ashton's blue eyes.

The girl acknowledged his nod, her eyes sweeping up and down his tall shape and coming to rest on the handsome features which she had secretly studied in the train last night.

In this supenseful moment, the Lone Wolf's main attention was on Curt McInlay, over by the window. If Ellen suspected he was the Ranger who was supposed to have been killed in a back alley of Fort Pecos last night, McInlay was the man to watch.

The briefest of smiles touched the girl's lips.

"How do you do, Mr. Hays," she said lightly, no hint of recognition surfacing in her eyes. "Don't mind what my grumpy old dad has to say. He knows Jerry Preece has me hogtied and ready for branding."

With that the girl turned on her heel and left the room. Hatfield pulled in a cautious breath, not daring to glance at Curt McInlay. The foreman had walked over to the door, as eager to terminate this interview as was the Ranger.

"Hays," Colonel Ashton said abruptly, "did you sleep in our bunkhouse last night?"

Hatfield licked his lips. What was coming now? Ashton's question was not merely idle curiosity.

"No sir," he said truthfully. "I just got in this morning and braced your ramrod for a job."

Ashton drummed the hardwood arms of his office chair with nervous fingers.

"Come from Fort?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Camped out on the prairie, sir."

Ashton turned back to his desk. "Just wondered if you'd heard about a killin' over at the Fort last night," he said casually. "A Texas Ranger got his ticket punched. Wondered if you'd pick up any saloon gossip about the matter."

At a signal from McInlay, Hatfield hurried out of the office. A moment later he and the foreman were striding out toward the Lazy Ladder barns.

Ellen Ashton, mounted on a leggy pinto, was cantering off across the sage flats to the northward.

"Had a couple of bad moments back there eh, Hays?" chuckled the foreman. "Well, the senorita didn't recognize you as the Socorro Kid, anyhow."

Hatfield thought, "I wish I was sure of that." Aloud, he said quizzically, "What would have happened if she had, McInlay?"

The ramrod grunted. "Hard tellin'. The Colonel would have had a stroke, most likely. He thinks the sun rises and sets in the Texas Ranger organization."

HATFIELD'S poker face gave no hint of the wild turmoil of emotion that was sweeping through him. Colonel Ashton was ignorant of any outlaw activity going on where the Lazy Ladder was concerned! But recalling something of Ashton's distinguished war record, he realized that the old Texas patriot was hardly the stripe to enter any contraband traffic knowingly.

Reaching the horse barn, McInlay turned to Hatfield and pointed off toward the looming Cascabel foothills.

"See that clump of cottonwoods yonder at the base of that spur, Kid?"

Hatfield's eyes searched out the landmark and he nodded.

"That's a water-hole with a lot of quicksand bog around it. Fencin' it in will be your chore this week, like I told the Colonel. I hate to work you like a peon, but we've got to keep you out of circulation till the boss shows up."

Hatfield, grinning faintly, nodded. "I savvy, Boss."

McInlay said, "Drop by the cookshack and pick up a box lunch from the *cocinero*. You'll find posts and bobwire and diggin' tools out at the water-hole. Sumidero Wells. Figure on being back for supper around sunset."

Having given his orders for the day, McInlay hurried on toward a blacksmith shop where his farrier was busy shoeing a span of mules.

Picking up Goldy, Hatfield visited the cookhouse long enough to get a noon-day meal packed, then headed out across the rolling Ladder graze toward Sumidero Wells.

So far, he was highly pleased with developments. He had more or less established the good citizenship of Colonel Ashton and his daughter. McInlay's guilty rôle with the Big Bend smuggling gang was something he had already learned from Jake Crespin, the Fort Pecos gambler.

"Too bad I can't smuggle a message down to Rio Vista and let Captain Linklater know the situation," Hatfield mused, as Goldy settled down to an easy lope. "When the smuggler boss shows up here at the ranch he may have quite a few men with him. I could use Linklater's Border patrolmen in a showdown."

Hatfield knew that when the smuggler chieftain arrived he could not carry on his masquerade as the Socorro Kid. He hoped against hope that no one in Fort Pecos, viewing the Kid's corpse, would give away the fact that the dead man was not a Texas Ranger.

Sumidero Wells had appeared to be only

five miles or so from the ranch, but distances were deceptive in west Texas, even to a man of Hatfield's range experience. As a result, it took more than an hour of steady riding before he reached the bosque of dwarf cottonwoods and willowbrake at the water-hole.

Goldy, approaching the seep for a drink, snorted nervously at his hoofs sank to the fetlocks in the quagmire circling the springs.

Quicksand was a real menace here and Hatfield could understand why McInlay was anxious to fence off the *sumidera*. After picketing Goldy on solid ground in the shade of the outlying cottonwoods, Hatfield located the rick of locust fence posts and reels of barbed wire.

He picked up a post-hole digger and went to work gouging out three-foot holes in the flinty Texas gumbo. By high noon, when he stopped to enjoy his box lunch, he had set only four corner posts.

The torrid Texas sun made the fence work doubly irksome. Still, knowing that he could not afford to incur McInlay's displeasure by loafing on the job, Hatfield worked steadily throughout the afternoon. The way things shaped up, he realized that this fencing chore would keep him occupied the rest of the week.

The sun was westering toward the remote Cascabel peaks when Hatfield paused in tamping dirt around a post to see a lone rider approaching the water-hole from the northeast.

AT FIRST glance, the Ranger believed Curt McInlay was coming out on the pretext of inspecting his work. Then, as the rider approached, Hatfield saw that it was a stranger.

Quartering in astride a shad-bellied bay gelding, the horseman raised an arm in greeting as Hatfield paused in his work to swab his face with a bandanna. The rider was a man in his late twenties, husky of build, dressed in the bull hide chaps, faded workshirt and flop-brimmed Stetson of an ordinary cowhand. He was grinning, but the grin was not matched by the furtive hostility in his sun-squinted gray eyes.

"Howdy," he said bleakly. "About time Ashton was doin' somethin' about fencin' off this boghole. I've lost quite a jag of beef critters here myself."

Hatfield knew now that this was no Lazy Ladder hand. The way the rider kept his horse broadside, the Ranger could not read its brand.

"It's a job," Hatfield commented, waiting for this buckaroo to tip his hand.

The rider remained silent during the time it took him to twist and lick a brown-paper cigarette. Then he hipped over in

THE STAKED PLAINS

THE very name Llano Estacado held an awful sound for travelers in the early days of the West. These vast stretches in the Panhandle of Texas were thought to be desert and when this was disproved, the stories of sandstorms and fierce northers continued, so that the region was shunned by all.

Actually, Coronado, the Spanish explorer, came to the Staked Plains looking for his fabulous cities of gold where the lowliest Indian ate from plates of solid 24 karat and drank from tumblers of the precious metal, while their chief slumbered under a tree decorated with hundreds of golden bells which rang sweetly upon the summer air.

Castaneda, the historian of the Coronado expedition, describes the vast sea of grass which actually composes the Staked Plains. The huge caravan—1000 horses, 500 cows, more than 5000 sheep and more than 1500 Indians and servants, marched forward and where they had passed the grass sprang erect again and there was no trace of their passing. If a man strayed from the company he might be lost in a matter of a few miles, for there were no trees, no landmarks, and the land was everywhere just a level ocean of grass.

saddle as if to clear the flap of his chaps pocket while his right hand dropped down in search of a match.

It was this innocent-seeming gesture which caught the Lone Wolf off-guard.

The stranger's brown hand did not get as far as his chaps pocket. With lightning rapidity, his hand coiled about the knurled walnut stock of a six-gun riding his thigh, and in the next instant Jim Hatfield found himself looking into the sinister black bore of a .45.

"What's this?" Hatfield demanded, dropping his tamping rod and elevating both hands before the menace of the drop. "Is it ag'in the law to fence in a quicksand bog?"

The rider's cigarette twitched as he grinned without mirth.

"Keep your hands high, hombre," he clipped. "I don't know what your game is, but I aim to find out why a Texas Ranger is hirin' out to the Lazy Ladder as an ordinary cowhand. Even the corpse of Jim Hatfield couldn't grub post-holes."

The rider kept his Colt trained on Hatfield as he warily stepped down from stirrups and came forward. Reaming the revolver's muzzle into the hard flesh of the Ranger's belly, the rider deftly lifted Hatfield's twin .45s from leather and tossed them to one side.

"So you think I'm Jim Hatfield?" the Ranger demanded.

The gunman shrugged. "Do you deny it?"

Hatfield's mouth clamped grimly. One of two things might have happened to bring this about. Either Ellen Ashton had tipped this man off that she had recognized Hatfield in her father's office this morning—which he doubted, for the girl had had no way of knowing who he was—or else this man was a friend of the Socorro Kid's who must have been over in Fort Pecos today and knew the dead man was not a Texas Ranger, despite his badge and identification papers.

If that were true, Hatfield knew he was in the direst peril of his career.

"Who are you?" the Ranger demanded.

The rider spat out his unlighted cigarette. His thumb eared the gunhammer to full cock.

"Let's just say I'm interested in findin' out whether that was the Socorro Kid they found shot to death in Fort Pecos this mornin'."

CHAPTER V

Strange Prison

HATFIELD was at an impassé, not knowing whether this strange belligerent rider was friend or foe. At any rate, this cold-eyed man was not sure he was on the right track or not. A wrong guess on Hatfield's part now could prove fatal.

"Well," the Ranger said heavily, "I'll check the bet to you, bucko. I never argue with a loaded gun."

The rider gestured over to where Goldy was on picket.

"We're takin' a little pasear away from here, Hatfield," he said. "I think I've heard about that bronc of yours. Goldy, ain't it? Get over there and fork him. And no booger plays."

Hatfield headed around the rim of the quicksand bog and approached his golden sorrel, the gunman stalking close at his back. Hatfield pulled the picket pin, coiled the rope, and tossed it over the Brazos horn of his kak.

A whistle from his captor brought the shad-bellied bay trotting over. The two men mounted as one, the waddy leaning from stirrups to pick up Goldy's reins with his free hand.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't admit being a Ranger, far as I can see," he said, reining the bay around next to the Ranger's stirrup. "You're not the Socorro Kid, and I'd bet my last chip on that. I aim to prove it, too!"

Hatfield thought, "He's not a hundred per cent sure I *am* a Ranger," and this set a new train of thought scurrying through his mind. He wondered if Curt McInlay

had sent this rider out to apprehend him, but was not sure whether he dared voice that question, not knowing the identity of his captor.

"Who is this Socorro Kid?" Hatfield hedged. "What gave you the idea I was posin' as the Socorro Kid?"

As he spoke, Hatfield's right spur touched urgently into Goldy's flank, on the side away from his captor's view.

The big stallion reared violently and, responding to the pressure of Hatfield's knee, lunged heavily against the withers of the bay gelding.

The bay's sudden bucking threw the gunman momentarily off-balance. In that instant, Hatfield reached out with both hands to seize the man's gun arm at wrist and elbow.

As the two bucking horses pulled apart, trumpeting, Hatfield put all his weight on the rider's arm, dragging him from saddle.

The .45 exploded alongside Hatfield's cheek, driving a bullet up into the cottonwoods. Both men hit the ground, Hatfield on top.

Forcing the gun away from his head, Hatfield released his right-hand grip on the other rider's wrist and drove a chopping blow to the man's jaw. All the power of Hatfield's sinewy arm was back of that pistonlike punch. He felt the gunhawk wilt, saw the gray eyes rock back in their sockets to expose the whites.

Coming to his feet, Hatfield jerked the smoking revolver from the fellow's limp hand and rapped the blued steel barrel sharply enough across his opponent's skull to blank out his senses.

The shad-bellied bay galloped off, stirrup leathers flapping. Goldly, snorting nervously, tripped on his reins and came to halt a few yards away.

Hatfield recovered his Stetson from the dust, swatted it against his knee and donned it. Panting heavily, he scanned the roundabout horizon to reassure himself that this brief struggle had not been witnessed.

Squatting down, Hatfield made a quick survey of the contents of the rider's pockets, but found nothing in the way of a ranch brand or any other means of identifying his foe.

What to do next posed a problem for Hatfield. It was nearing sundown, time for him to be heading back to the Lazy Ladder for supper, as McInlay had instructed him to do.

BUT what if McInlay had sent this man out to capture him as an impostor? Now that the bay had stampeded out of sight beyond a hogback to the north, Hatfield had no way of knowing if it wore a Ladder brand. The only thing he was sure of was that this man had not breakfasted with the Lazy Ladder crew this morning.

"If McInlay *did* send him," Hatfield mused, "then this waddy is an outlaw."

This unforeseen turn of events could spell disaster for Hatfield if he didn't handle things right. Assuming the man to be a smuggler, would Hatfield be able to force him to identify the mysterious chief of the Border hoppers?

But merely finding out who the boss was did not suit Hatfield's plans. He possibly could have frightened that information out of Jake Crespin last night. What was more important was capturing the boss with illegal goods in his possession, on Texas soil. That was the only evidence that would hold up in court—not the testimony of an underling, testimony which probably would be a fabric of lies anyway.

What was he to do with this fellow? Getting him to the custody of the sheriff in Fort Pecos would take time, time that he did not have at his disposal. Come what may, Hatfield did not want to run any risk of scaring off the smuggler boss' scheduled trip to the Lazy Ladder with a contraband shipment.

Hatfield turned back to his sprawled victim. Blood seeped from the cleanshaven jaw where Hatfield's rocky knuckles had smashed home. A ghastly lump was forming on his temple where Hatfield had gun-whipped him.

The Lone Wolf reached automatically for his handcuffs, then remembered that

he had left the fetters notched on the dead wrist of the Socorro Kid last night.

Obviously, this man had to be hidden somewhere. If Hatfield failed to show up for supper at the Lazy Ladder tonight, Curt McInlay would be sure to ride out to Sumidero Wells to investigate, regardless of whether or not he had learned that the man he had believed to be the Socorro Kid was in reality a Texas Ranger.

Hatfield was again at an impasse. To kill time while he made up his mind as to what to do, he cut a rawhide thong from his saddle and used it to bind his victim's wrists together behind his back. Then he slung the unconscious shape across Goldy's saddle and swung astride behind the cantle.

He decided that the only thing to do, under the circumstances, was to ride back to the Lazy Ladder after dark and make contact with Colonel Jeff Ashton. Let the Colonel know that his foreman was a known member of a smuggling ring, and have Ashton bring McInlay into his ranch-house office to confront Jim Hatfield. He was ready to take his chances on Ashton's character.

Such a plan had its disadvantages. With McInlay under arrest, it was almost certain that the smuggling boss would not show up at his secret rendezvous on the Lazy Ladder.

The western skyline was aflame with crimson light as Jim Hatfield headed Goldy back in the direction of Ashton's headquarters, going at a walk so that he could arrive there under the covering shield of darkness.

He had ridden a mile from the water-hole when he spotted two horses moving in from the north at an angle to intercept him. In the fast-fading twilight, the Ranger could tell nothing except that one of the two horses was empty-saddled. A rider was astride the other pony, a rider carrying a rifle.

Hatfield pulled up, hand on gun-butt, as the rider came in at a full gallop. Then a scarlet shaft of sunset glow filtered through the cloud cover over the Cascabels, and Hatfield recognized the situation for what it was.

The rider was Ellen Ashton, on her pinto. The horse she was trailing was his victim's runaway bay.

SUNSET light glinted on the girl's leveled rifle as the Ranger lifted an arm to wave the girl down. Surely he would be able to convince Ellen Ashton as to his identity, and then perhaps she could identify this stranger slung across his saddle.

The girl screamed "You've killed him!" and her rifle blazed at point-blank range.

Something struck Hatfield's scalp that felt like the slash of a hot blade. His senses reeled and he felt himself falling. He was out cold before he hit the ground.

Consciousness returned to Hatfield instantly, however, or so it seemed to him. In reality there had been a considerable time lapse, for it was now full dark and he was back astride Goldy, and Goldy was in motion.

Dimly against the stars he made out the shapes of the riders flanking his stirrups. One was the man he had fought with at the water-hole with a white turban of bandage girdling his bare head. The other rider was Ellen Ashton.

He tried to speak, but his throat muscles seemed paralyzed. Then he discovered that his arms were roped to his saddle horn—either to render him helpless, or to keep him from falling.

"Leavin' Hatfield at my place is the best bet until we know for sure what he was doin' on the Lazy Ladder under another name, I think," he heard the man saying. "You go back home, Ellen, and I'll ride on to the Fort and fetch Sheriff Gorham. I'll see you first thing tomorrow."

Hatfield felt nausea stabbing his innards. His head reeled dizzily and he felt the sticky sensation of dried blood covering one side of his head. He realized now that Ellen's bullet must have clipped his skull, knocking him out.

"I'm sorry I shot him, Jerry," Ellen said. "But my first thought—seeing you hanging across his saddle—naturally I jumped to the conclusion you were dead.

I had no way of knowing then that he wasn't the Socorro Kid."

Jerry! Then this man with whom he had fought at Sumidero Wells must be Ellen's future husband, Jerry Preece! When Ellen had seen him at the Lazy Ladder this morning she must have wondered whether he was a Ranger or an outlaw, and had decided not to confide in her father, but to head for the Rafter P and, let Preece know her puzzling secret. And now, somehow, they seemed sure he was Hatfield.

"It's lucky you didn't kill him, honey," Jerry Preece answered. "Hatfield must have some good reason for—"

Strangely, Jerry Preece's voice seemed to fade away. Hatfield tried desperately to speak, to let this couple know he had returned to consciousness. Instead, his senses faded and he slumped limply over the pommel. . . .

When next his bullet-stunned senses cleared, Jim Hatfield found himself lost in a black void. His arms, he found, were no longer bound. He was lying on his back on cold earth. Other than that he could tell nothing of his surroundings.

Lucidity returned slowly to Hatfield's brain. He knew, now, that Jerry Preece had ridden over to the Wells to investigate Ellen's astonishing disclosure as to his identity.

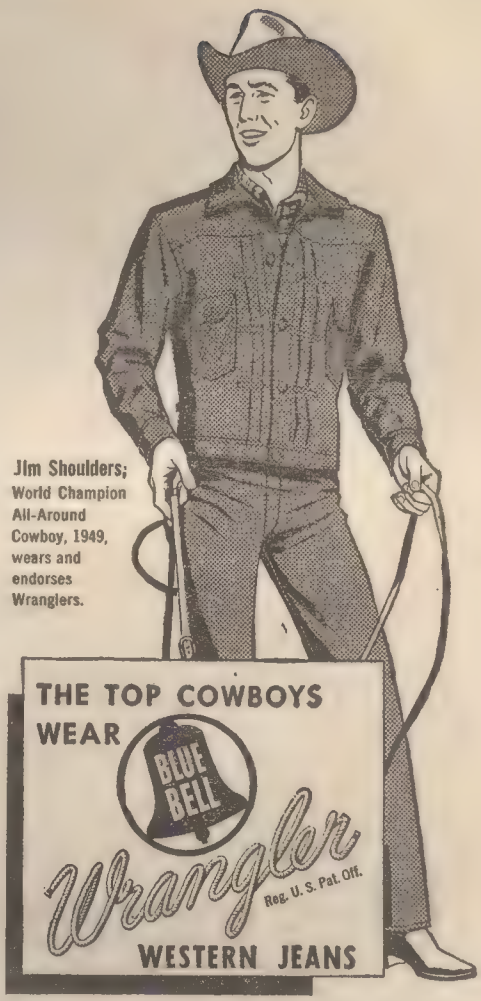
Preece, in not admitting his own identity, must have held the belief that this man might not, after all, be Jim Hatfield. It must have been the Rafter P man's intention to bring his prisoner face to face with the girl and dig to the bottom of Hatfield's duplicity.

What had the pair been discussing at the time he regained his senses so briefly out there on the night-shrouded prairie?

Recollection came slowly to the Ranger. Preece had mentioned the name of Sheriff Gorham. That would be Fred Gorham, the well-known peace officer at Fort Pecos, a friend of Hatfield's for years.

Preece wanted Ellen to return to her father's ranch while he, Preece, rode on to town to report the mystery to a duly constituted officer of the law.

[*Turn page*]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Fighting off dizziness, Hatfield rummaged his pockets for a match. He struck one on his thumb nail and stared around.

HE WAS in a cellar of some sort; on Preece's ranch north of the Lazy Ladder, probably. Preece had shown rare good judgment in not wanting to appear in Fort Pecos with a man who was supposed to have been killed in the town less than twenty-four hours before. Preece intended to bring Sheriff Gorham out here to the Rafter P for a pow-wow with Hatfield.

The cellar had been dug out of the solid earth. Just as the match sputtered out in his fingers, Hatfield saw the short flight of wooden steps leading up to a slab door set at an angle with the ground.

He struck another match and consulted his watch. It had stopped at 10:14. He had no way of knowing what time of night it was. Obviously he had been unconscious for several hours. The sun had set around seven o'clock.

Groping his way up the steps, Hatfield put his shoulders against the sloping door. It was barred or locked from the outside. He barely had strength enough to shake the planks.

After striking three more matches, Hatfield had satisfied himself that there was no immediate escaping from this root cellar. That did not matter. In a matter of hours, at most, Preece would be back with a friendly lawman.

At least, that is what Hatfield hoped. Suppose Preece got caught by suspicious men from McInlay . . . suppose Preece himself believed in McInlay. . . . But he put aside these doubts.

The only thing Hatfield had to worry about now was finding some explanation for his absence from the Lazy Ladder tonight that would not rouse Curt McInlay's suspicions.

Distinctly to his ears, some twenty minutes later, came the thud of hoofbeats approaching the root cellar. Hatfield's pulses jumped, as he heard a mutter of men's voices outside the cellar door.

Preece and the sheriff were here.

CHAPTER VI

Journey of Doom

SPURRED boots jingled as the riders approached the root cellar. Muffled conversation reached Hatfield as he stood waiting in the inky blackness for the door to open.

He started violently as a gunshot exploded outside, followed by a jangle of metal as a padlock was removed from a heavy hasp of the cellar door. Then the door opened to expose a rectangle of star-powdered Texas sky, against which two blocky shapes appeared.

With the concussion of that shot still ringing in his ears, Hatfield's brain reeled to a shock of a new despair.

Preece would have had a key to that lock! These men had been forced to shoot it off the hasp instead.

Instinctively the Ranger's hands dropped to where his guns should have hung. But his Colt harness was missing.

A match spurted. By its saffron glare, Hatfield found himself looking up at two sinister, grinning faces. One was a Lazy Ladder waddy he remembered as the mule-shoer he had seen working in Ashton's blacksmith shop that morning. The other was Curt McInlay.

And the foreman's first words came to the Ranger with all the impact of a death sentence:

"Howdy, Jim Hatfield. Alias the Socorro Kid. Alias Jack Hays!"

Gunmetal made its slurring sound on leather as McInlay made his draw. The lethal snout of a drawn Colt preceded the Lazy Ladder foreman as he came down the steps toward Hatfield.

"We're fools for luck, Alves!" McInlay laughed, speaking to the blacksmith behind him. "Located our man the first place we looked. This could have been a wild goose chase, comin' over to Preece's with as little as we had to go on."

Hatfield stared into the leveled bore of

McInlay's .45, bracing himself for the shock of lead he fully expected to cut him down at point-blank range. As the light went out in the foreman's hand, Alves got another match going immediately.

"Anything to say, Hatfield?" McInlay inquired sarcastically.

Hatfield shrugged. McInlay was enjoying this sadistic cat-and-mouse play.

"You do the talkin'," the Lone Wolf muttered. "You hold all the aces. You seem to think I'm a Ranger. Prove it."

McInlay backed up the steps, ordering Hatfield to follow. When they were outside, the blacksmith stepped in behind him to seize his arms.

All around lay the unfamiliar buildings and whitewashed corrals of Preece's Rafter P ranch. The whole scene had an unreal, ghostly aspect under the thin shine of the Texas stars.

"I'll prove it, all right," McInlay growled. "Tonight when you didn't come back from the Wells, I went out to the horse barn to saddle up and investigate. Just then Ellen Ashton come foggin' in, and met the Colonel outside the barn. The old man was fixin' to ride over here to see what was keepin' his darlin' daughter."

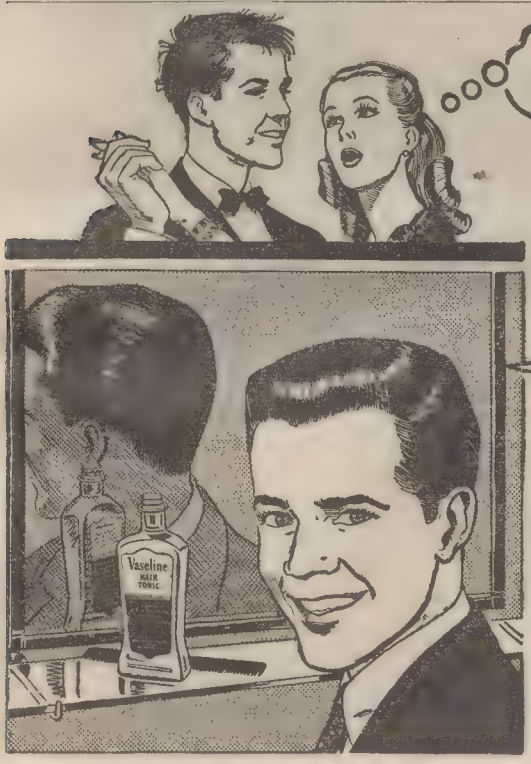
Hatfield waited for the foreman to go on. He was powerless in Alves' crushing grip. He still felt weak from the effects of the bullet furrow on his scalp.

"Anyway," McInlay went on, "I heard Ellen tell her dad how she and Preece had you in custody, and how they'd found the initials 'J.H.' punched through your hatband. Said they'd left you somewhere here on Rafter P while Preece went to town to fetch the sheriff to see if you wasn't Hatfield. So Alves and I decided we'd mosey over here for a look ourselves."

Alves muttered in his throaty, guttural voice, "Put a slug een the Ranger's breesket and leave heem een the cellar for the *jerife* to find, Curt. We are not safe here."

McInlay shook his head. "This here Ranger Hatfield has gone to a lot of trouble tryin' to find out who dishes out our

[*Turn page*]



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orders, ain't he? Wantin' to do what the whole Border Patrol couldn't do—and all they wanted out of him was just an escort for a prisoner. He wanted to show what a big skookum he-wolf he was, so, I think we won't disappoint this badge toter. You're goin' to take him to Rio Vista, savvy? I'd do it myself, only I can't afford to turn up missin' on the Lazy Ladder."

ALVES dug his fingers into Hatfield's arms.

"Then let us vamose, Senor Curt. I do not like thees place, knowing Preece and the *jerife* are on their way here tonight."

McInlay nodded. "Go over to Jerry's remuda and dab your twine on Hatfield's big sorrel, then. I figure we got another good twenty minutes before the law can get here."

Alves retained his iron grip on Hatfield until McInlay had unbuckled a coil of sisal lass-rope from his saddle pommel and slipped the noose over the Ranger's head. Then the Lazy Ladder blacksmith hurried off through the darkness to pick up Goldy.

"It was a pretty gutty thing to do, Hatfield—passing yourself off as the Socorro Kid," McInlay remarked, with grudging admiration. "I can see how it happened now. Jake Crespin hit the wrong target. Since nobody this far north had ever met the Socorro Kid, you got away with it."

There was nothing for Hatfield to do but bluff it out.

"Alves is takin' me to see the boss. When he sees what you've done, McInlay, I think you won't be workin' for us much longer."

The grin faded from McInlay's tight-lipped mouth.

"You can prove you ain't Hatfield," he challenged, "by tellin' me who the boss is. Do that, and I'll believe you're the Socorro Kid."

Hatfield laughed sarcastically. "You should know the rules, McInlay—never mention the head man by name. Not to anybody!"

It was obvious from McInlay's altering expression that Hatfield's evasion carried weight, that such a rule truly existed.

"Fair enough, bucko," the Lazy Ladder foreman grunted. "All I can do now is send you down to talk things over with the boss. If you *are* Hatfield, I think the boss would enjoy havin' you for a hostage. If not—handlin' you is his business, not mine. I'm just doin' my duty."

Further talk was interrupted by the approach of the blacksmith, Alves, leading Goldy. The sorrel was saddled and bridled, but with Preece's gear, not Hatfield's.

"All right—get aboard," McInlay growled, his gun's point following the Ranger as Hatfield mounted the sorrel. It would be impossible to spur for a getaway, as long as the strangling noose was around his throat.

In a few moments the three riders were heading south in the direction of a remote cluster of twinkling lights which Jim Hatfield decided must be Colonel Ashton's headquarters.

A mile from the Rafter P, McInlay reined up, cocking an ear to the night breeze. Faintly in the distance, Hatfield heard a rataplan of hoofbeats. Two riders were approaching the Rafter P from the direction of Fort Pecos.

"Nick of time," McInlay grunted. "That'll be Preece and the sheriff. Ridin' hell-bent for that root cellar."

Alves stirred uneasily in saddle.

"I theenk we better make the tracks, Senor Curt. Specially if I got this trip all the way to the Border ahead of me."

Hatfield felt the desperation of a trapped animal. The oncoming riders were too far away to hear him if he shouted for help; in any event, the wind was from the wrong direction.

"Their corks will really start to bobbin' when they find their bird has flown the coop," McInlay chuckled, getting under way again. "Ellen and the Colonel didn't have the slightest notion anybody overheard their pow-wow tonight. And knowin' you always operate as the Lone Wolf, Hatfield they won't believe outsiders blasted open that cellar door. This will make Preece sure you're the Kid."

DESPAIR lay heavy in Hatfield's breast as they jogged on toward the Lazy Ladder lights. Two miles north of Ashton's place, McInlay reined up again.

"The Colonel knows I aimed to send you to Presidio to pick up those brood bulls, Alves," the Lazy Ladder foreman remarked, "so he won't think it strange if he notices you ain't around tomorrow. After you turn Hatfield over to the chief, you might as well head up the river to Presidio and pick up them bulls."

Alves grunted acknowledgement of the orders and caught the lariat which was tied around Hatfield's neck.

Curvetting his black horse around to face the prisoner, Curt McInlay said conversationally, "Reckon this is *adios* for you and me, Hatfield. Like I said, I admire your guts. You live up to your rep. I'm sorry you ain't workin' our game instead of agin us. Give my regards to the devil."

McInlay headed off at a gallop, in the direction of the Lazy Ladder. Alves gave Hatfield's neck rope a jerk and turned southwestward, at an angle that would cause them to avoid Ashton's headquarters by a safe three-mile margin.

Before they had traveled a hundred yards, the blacksmith decided to avoid the risk of his prisoner loosening the lasso from his neck and attempting a getaway. At gun's point, Alves forced Hatfield to place his hands on the saddle-horn and, working with deft skill, Alves tied his prisoner's wrists together and knotted them to the horn.

He did not, however, remove the noose from Hatfield's neck, but chose to use it as a trail rope.

By the time dawn commenced to color the brasada-furred horizon beyond the Pecos, hunger pangs were stabbing Hatfield with increased frequency. He judged that they had traveled forty miles from the Lazy Ladder's southern drift fence. This part of the Big Bend country was practically uninhabited. The first trace of civilization they would reach would be Rio Vista.

"This boss of yours." Hatfield spoke for the first time, just as sunrise flooded the roundabout malpais with golden light. "Who is he? Or would you know?"

Daylight revealed Alves as a smallpox-scarred half-breed of tremendous physical build. With McInlay, he was the only man on the Lazy Ladder pay-roll that Hatfield could definitely link with the Big Bend smuggling ring.

"No sabe Ingles," Alves answered sourly.

"'Sta bien," Hatfield replied in fluent Spanish. "You understand Espanol, then. Who is this boss you're taking me to?"

Alves flushed angrily. "You think I am dumb in the *cabeza,* Senor Rangero? I tell you notheeng. Notheeng. Eef I had my way, your bones would be left out here een the desert for the *zopilote* buzzards."

Hatfield grinned with a humor he was far from feeling.

Continuing in Spanish, he said tauntingly, "But I am too important a hostage to bushwhack, Alves. You know what I think? I think you are afraid to tell me who your boss is because you are afraid I might escape before we reach the Rio Grande today. I think you are a cowardly *cabrone."*

But Alves was not to be goaded into dropping any secrets of the *contrabandistas* which he might possess. He lapsed into a surly quiet, his black eyes roving the bleak expanse of the desert with a constant vigilance, ready to take to cover at the first sight of a passing rider.

At high noon they reached a water-hole, an oasis too small to be found on any map of the Big Bend. Here they watered and rested the horses, Alves grudgingly permitting his prisoner to drink brackish water from his saddle canteen before refilling it from the cool spring.

The blacksmith carried a loaf of coarse black bread, crisp *tacos* and a cold tamale wrapped in a corn husk. He washed the meal down with a draft of *pulque* he carried in a wicker-cased bottle in his *alforja* bags, but he permitted not so much as a crumb of food for the Ranger.

Shortly after one o'clock, as near as Hatfield could judge from the sun, they resumed their trek across the wastelands.

Alves was evidently familiar with local landmarks, for he steered an unerring course in the direction of Rio Vista.

CHAPTER VII

Surprise in the Night

THE SUN was nearing its appointed notch in the lithic backbone of the lofty Santiago Range to westward when the *mestizo* blacksmith and his prisoner reached the railroad which had its terminal at Rio Vista. The high *cordilleras* of old Mexico lay in their purple beauty on the south horizon now, and through the shimmering heat-haze Hatfield could make out the dark, meandering smudge which was the Rio Grande.

Shortly before night closed in on the badlands, the Ranger's throbbing eyes picked out the formless sprawl of color marking the river-bank town of Rio Vista.

He thought with a grim irony on the fact that the United States Border Patrol had a police barracks in that town ahead; that there the Immigration and Customs authorities maintained one of their isolated Ports of Entry.

Captain Isham Linklater of the Border Patrol lived in Rio Vista. It was from Linklater's grubby little jail that Hatfield had picked up the Socorro Kid upon orders from Ranger Captain McDowell in Austin. Was it possible that less than forty-eight hours had elapsed since he had declined Linklater's offer of a Border Patrol bodyguard to assist him in getting his prisoner safely to the capitol? It seemed an eternity.

The blackness of a moonless night closed in on the Border country as Alves put the horses down the arrow-straight line of railroad tracks toward the shimmering lights of Rio Vista.

A mile outside the settlement Alves put the horses into the shelter of a section house to avoid being trapped in the growing white eye of a freight train's locomotive, outbound from the Rio Vista shipping pens. After the long train had thundered past they resumed their irksome trek down the roadbed.

Hunger, added to the beating punishment of a hatless ride of over sixty miles in the blazing sun, had sapped the vigor from Jim Hatfield's frame. His wrists had swollen under the constricting hemp bonds which tied him to the saddle-horn, and Alves brutally refused to loosen them.

Death lay ahead, the ultimate destination of this doomed journey. Hatfield had little hopes of being held hostage for long. He knew the American Government would make no compromise with the smuggling agents, even to spare his life.

Throughout the grueling miles and endless hours of this day's travel, he had pondered means of escape, rejecting each one as impossible. Alves was too wary a guard to be outwitted.

Now, nearing the outskirts of Rio Vista, Alves swung south from the railroad, cutting through a dense jungle of junco thicket until he picked up a river-bank trail flanking the murky Rio Grande.

Hatfield's first thought was that Alves planned to make a crossing of the river to reach Mexican soil. To do so would entail swimming the river, for there was no ford in this area. Hatfield was reminded that it was at this exact spot that Captain Linklater's alert Border Patrolmen had captured the Socorro Kid swimming the Rio Grande, little guessing that the capture was part of an elaborate scheme designed to bring about the doom of Jim Hatfield, whom they feared more greatly than they feared any of the Border Patrol. And knowing, of course, that the top Ranger was again on his way to help ferret out the smuggling ring.

Suddenly, from the inky blackness of the brush directly ahead, a steely voice lashed the night:

"*Parada ustedes!* Halt! Who goes?"

A grunt of alarm came from Alves' throat as he skidded his bronc to a halt. From the brushy thicket ahead came the ominous metallic rasp of a Winchester levering a cartridge into the breech.

"Quien es?" the Lazy Ladder blacksmith stammered. "Who ees eet?"

Jim Hatfield's heart leaped with a new hope as the clipped tones of the challenger rapped out:

"Border Patrol check station. Advance and be identified."

THE voice spoke Spanish, but in this instant Hatfield knew he had a chance for survival. Alves, unaware of the cordon of guard posts maintained around the clock along the Rio Grande by the United States Government, had blundered into the one nearest the outskirts of Rio Vista.

Starlight glinted on the blade of a *cuchillo* which Alves yanked out of a bootleg sheath. For an instant Jim Hatfield believed the blacksmith meant to stab him. Instead, Alves severed the rope connected to the noose around his prisoner's neck with one swipe of the stock knife.

With a hoarse bawl of fear, Alves wheeled his horse around, the animal's rump jouncing Hatfield's leg and knocking it from his left stirrup. Then Alves was beating a fast retreat into the darkness, heading along the river-bank trail before cutting into the *brasada* thickets.

"Hold your fire!" Hatfield shouted, catching the shine of an up-whipping rifle-barrel. "I'm in your line of aim!"

Hatfield heard the Border Patrolman's muffled oath as he lowered the Winchester.

"Who're you?"

"Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger. Let that buscadero go—I'll attend to him later. Come and loosen these ropes."

The Border Patrolman, wary of treachery, set his rifle aside and drew a six-gun from his belt. Then, approaching Goldy, the officer struck a match and held it up.

"Buck Castle!" the Lone Wolf Ranger exclaimed, recognizing the freckled, moon-round face of the Border Patrol corporal staring up at him. "Am I glad to see you, man!"

A boisterous laugh escaped Buck Castle as he overcame his surprise.

"Jim Hatfield!" he ejaculated, getting busy at once on the knots which bound the Ranger's fists to the saddle horn. "I thought you'd be in Austin by now."

When his hands were free, Hatfield flexed them painfully, rubbing the circulation back into the numb, swollen members. Buck Castle was one of Captain Linklater's patrolmen, permanently assigned to guard duty here at Post A on the outskirts of Rio Vista. And incidentally, it had been Buck Castle who had spotted the Socorro Kid swimming the river at this point, two weeks ago.

As tersely as possible, Hatfield explained the grim web of circumstances which had led up to the Socorro Kid's death and his own capture by the smuggling band's rep at Colonel Ashton's ranch.

"I expected to be face to face with the *contrabandista* chief in a few more minutes, Buck," Hatfield concluded. "I'm lucky Alves didn't know this river-bank trail was guarded."

Buck Castle's cherubic countenance expanded in a grin. Then the expression faded, to be replaced by one of deep concern.

"Jim," the corporal said, "it'd be plumb suicide for you to ride on into town to Cap Linklater's office. That blacksmith will make a beeline for his owlhoot headquarters, you can bet on that."

Hatfield nodded agreement. "I think I'd better wait here at your guard station," he said, "while you bring Linklater to me, Corporal."

The Border Patrol guard station was little more than a shanty, built a few feet back from the river-bank trail so that, in daylight, it was concealed by heavy *agarita* brush.

Corporal Castle guided the Ranger to the shack, after Hatfield had removed the saddle from Goldy. Once inside the building, Castle closed the door, drew a shade over the one window, and lighted a coal-oil lantern.

The aroma of simmering coffee on a small stove in one corner of the guard shack was like ambrosia to Hatfield's nostrils. The portly Border Patrol corporal grinned as he took a tin cup from a shelf and poured his guest a steaming

quantity of black java.

"You'll find a snack of bait in the grub box yonder," Buck Castle said, indicating the box. "You understand, Jim, I'm not supposed to desert my post here until I'm relieved at daylight."

"Sure," the Ranger said, swigging deeply of the coffee. "I'll keep an eye on your stretch of river while you're gone. It is important that I make my report to Captain Linklater as soon as possible."

AS THE corporal was leaving, he thought of something. He handed Hatfield his .30-30 carbine.

"Just in case you need it—to take care of that Alves jasper if he circles back," Castle said. "Not that he will. He'll probably keep runnin' till his horse gives out."

Castle slipped out into the night and headed in the direction of Captain Linklater's headquarters in the nearby town.

Hatfield shared the corporal's belief that he was in no danger from Alves. It had been a disastrous stroke of bad luck that the Lazy Ladder blacksmith had made his escape, for the first thing Alves would do would be to report what had happened to his smuggler chief here in Rio Vista.

Forewarned, the first thing the outlaw leader would do, Hatfield believed, would be to get word to Curt McInlay that his usefulness as a receiver of contraband goods was at an end. It was Hatfield's intention to get Captain Linklater to dispatch a Border Patrol officer to the Lazy Ladder at once, tonight, to place McInlay under arrest, along with the gambler, Jake Crespin, in Fort Pecos.

Otherwise, Hatfield could not feel too badly over Alves' escape. He realized how narrow his own escape had been.

As soon as he had allayed his hunger with the tinned meat, cheese and hardtack which Buck Castle's ration box contained, food which he washed down with copious amounts of coffee, Hatfield blew out the lantern and made his way out to the river-bank trail, rifle in hand.

The efficiency of the United States Border Patrol depended on the constant, hour in, hour out, day and night vigilance of its sentries. Buck Castle was breaking orders to leave his post tonight; but the circumstances were such that Hatfield had no other alternative.

He fully agreed with Castle that it would be suicidal for him, Hatfield, to approach Linklater's office in the center of town.

A half-hour dragged by and Hatfield began to grow restive, knowing Castle had had plenty of time to notify the Border Patrol captain of his presence here. Finally a crunch of boots on the trail from town caught Hatfield's attention, and from the brush Goldy blew his lips in a muted warning of someone's approach.

Hatfield waited until he had the approaching figure skylined against the stars and the glare of Rio Vista's lights. Then he called out the conventional challenge:

"Halt, and identify yourself!"

"Corporal Castle, Jim!" came the young guardsman's voice.

"Advance and be recognized, Buck."

When Castle joined him, Hatfield relaxed. The guard said in a tense whisper, "Had trouble locatin' the Captain, him bein' off duty. He was takin' a bath at the Trail House where he lives. Said tell you he'll be here quick as he can haul on his boots."

"Bueno," Hatfield breathed. "If you don't mind, I think I'll get back to the shack and stretch out on that cot of yours. I'm bushed to the bone."

Back inside the guardhouse, Hatfield let the intolerable tension of this day ease from his jaded muscles. He surrendered to his half-drugged senses and drifted off to sleep.

Almost at once, it seemed, Corporal Castle was shaking him awake. The lantern was blazing in Hatfield's eyes.

"Cap'n Linklater sent a courier over to say he's been delayed, Jim—official business at headquarters. Sorry to wake you up, but orders were to let you know."

Hatfield sat up, rubbing his eyes drowsily.

"All right." He yawned. "But I wish Linklater would rattle his hocks. I've got some urgent messages to put into code and

get on the wire."

"Know exactly how you feel, Jim," Castle said apologetically. "Courier said the Captain wants you to wait here, though. And he said he'd be along in just a few minutes."

CHAPTER VIII

The Traitor

JIM HATFIELD regarded his chafed wrists moodily. A sense of time running out on him made his nerves as taut as overwound clock springs. Right this moment, Alves might be in conference with the smuggler chief. And the contraband boss might send Alves hot-footing it back to the Lazy Ladder to warn McInlay. Hatfield had to prevent that at all costs.

As it was, he knew that the scheduled contraband shipment to the Lazy Ladder would be called off, perhaps permanently. To that extent, Alves' escape tonight was a calamity which might postpone the smuggler's capture for years.

"Anybody in Fort Pecos know about you posin' as the Socorro Kid, Jim?" Buck Castle asked curiously.

"Nobody," Hatfield said. "I was on my own. Didn't know who I could trust, not even the telegraph operator at the Fort, so I didn't notify my own headquarters that I was still alive. Far as Captain McDowell thinks, I'm dead."

Buck Castle chuckled. "Always lone-wolf it, eh, Jim?"

The young guardsman picked up the rifle he had loaned Hatfield and went back outside. A few moments later Hatfield heard Castle challenging someone, then a mutter of voices.

The door swung open then and Castle stepped inside.

"Captain Linklater to see you, Jim," he said respectfully.

Hatfield got to his feet, needled by a certain embarrassment at meeting Linklater again. After all, Linklater had wanted to provide him with a guard.

Heavy boots thudded on the threshold of the guardhouse. The lamplight shone full in the face of the towering figure that filled the doorway.

But it was not the neatly uniformed figure of Border Patrol Captain Isham Linklater.

Facing Hatfield above a leveled six-shooter was his erstwhile captor, the Lazy Ladder blacksmith, Alves!

A freezing sensation flowed through the Ranger in sick waves. He tore his gaze off the *mestizo* to stare at Corporal Buck Castle, who now stood facing him with the Winchester lifted to hip height.

"You're trapped, Ranger!" snarled the Border Patrolman, his once pleasant voice resembling an animal's snarl now, his moon face contorted with a triumphant leer. "You've frayed out your string. Alves knew what he was doin', blunderin' into Guard Post A tonight."

The enormity of Buck Castle's treachery stunned Hatfield. He realized now that the weight of fatigue which had obscured his thinking accounted for his not having become suspicious of Castle's overlong absence in town.

Castle had not looked up Linklater. He had joined Alves at some prearranged rendezvous. Alves, knowing that Castle was on night shift at this guard post, had deliberately swung down to the river-bank trail tonight.

"You're wonderin' why I just didn't put a slug in your noggin when I found out who Alves had brought in, Jim?" Castle grinned wolfishly. "When I challenged the two of you, of course, I didn't know it was Alves. When he spoke, I knew. That's why I didn't cut down on him with my carbine."

Hatfield grinned crookedly. "You stalled for time, wantin' to make sure I hadn't tipped off Ranger headquarters about bein' alive and posin' as the Socorro Kid," the trapped man said with bitter self-condemnation. "That shows how fully I've trusted you, Buck Castle, all these years —that I'd talk as free as I did to you."

SHAME did not touch the Border Patrol traitor. A man so constructed psychologically that he could betray his own country would chose to consider himself clever rather than contemptible.

"And you must be the chief we've tried so hard to dab our loop on," Hatfield continued. "No wonder Linklater couldn't plug this leak in the Border, with one of his own trusted guards bein' the kingpin back of all this smugglin'."

Buck Castle shrugged. "If I wanted to brag I'd thank you for the compliment and keep my mouth shut, Jim," he said. "But I am as small a spud in the Border-hopping business as I am in the Border Patrol. It's the money I'm after. A Government police job here on the Border don't pay much. Contraband runnin' has already made me a fortune—and I'm just one link in the chain."

Hatfield's mouth twisted. "You ain't fit to spit on, Castle. A man who would sell out his own people is the lowest breed of snake I can think of."

Again Castle showed no sign of remorse.

"Go ahead—call me a traitor if it'll make you feel better, Jim. Take yourself. With your brains you could make a lot more *dinero* than you do as a Texas Ranger."

Hatfield was too infuriated to debate the issue. His mind was dwelling on what lay immediately ahead. Castle and Alves must know what the smuggler boss wanted done with their prisoner. Would he be held for ransom, or as a hostage to exchange for any smugglers the Rangers might arrest in future, or was Jim Hatfield considered too dangerous an opponent to let live?

The answer was not slow in coming. Castle turned to Alves and inquired in Spanish, "What does the *jefe* want us to do with Hatfield?"

The Lazy Ladder blacksmith answered in the same tongue, "I am to take him downriver half-way to Guard Post B and shoot him, Senor Buck. And dump his carcass into the Rio Grande."

The Lone Wolf's first impulse was to fling himself upon his two captors, hoping to catch them off-guard and wrest a gun from either Alves or Castle.

But such a move would be suicidal. His best bet now was to be submissive, take his chances on escaping once Alves was heading with him down the Rio Grande trail. Guard posts were spaced five miles apart along the river. That meant he would be riding with Alves for at least two miles from this spot before the blacksmith halted to carry out his grim orders.

"After you do that," Castle said, "you'll be goin' back to Lazy Ladder, I take it?"

Alves shook his head. "Senor McInlay wants me to ride on to Presidio and pick up some breeding stock for Colonel Ashton. I must have some reason for being away from the ranch today."

Castle nodded thoughtfully. "In that case you won't be back to the ranch by Wednesday night. We'll have to send someone else along to cash in Jake Crespin's chips. After the way he bungled things with the Socorro Kid, he's outlived his time."

Castle moved back against the wall of the shack and lifted a coil of pleated rawhide reata from a rafter peg. He tossed the rope to the man in the doorway.

"Hog-tie this Ranger," he ordered Alves, "and hit the trail with him. Can't risk Captain Linklater droppin' in on one of his surprise inspections."

Alves grinned maliciously at Hatfield as he took the reata and fondled it.

For Jim Hatfield, there was no recourse but to submit to having his arms once more tied behind his back. Castle kept his .30-30 cocked and aimed, less than a foot of space separating Hatfield's torso from the muzzle of the Winchester. There was no sense in inviting a point-blank bullet now.

When Alves had trussed the Ranger's arms to his satisfaction, he prodded Hatfield's spine with his Colt barrel and his prisoner walked back into the darkness. Castle followed, saddling Goldy for Hatfield's one-way ride to perdition.

BEFORE ordering Hatfield to mount the sorrel, Castle took the precau-

tion of knotting the Ranger's bandanna about his mouth, to prevent him shouting for aid.

Alves led his own horse out of the brush and picked up a trail rope tied to Goldy's bit ring. After Castle had assisted Hatfield into stirrups, the blacksmith mounted his Lazy Ladder pony and spurred out into the river-bank trail.

"In a way I hate to let you be killed with your curiosity about our boss still unsatisfied, Jim," Castle said from the blackness. "But one reason for the success of our wild bunch is ridin' close herd on our secrets—even with men who ain't got long to live. *Hasta luego,* Jim."

Hatfield made a grunting sound behind his gag. Alves took up the slack in Goldy's trail rope and reined his mount aside to let his prisoner take the lead. A moment later the two riders were moving off down the serpentine path which followed the Rio Grande cutbank.

Hipping around in saddle, Hatfield peered past his guard to see the lights of Rio Vista in the distance. A switch engine was assembling a consist of freight cars in the town yards, making an unholy din in the night.

A deep anger was burning like acid in the Ranger's vitals. Buck Castle's perfidy had hit him hard, for he was recalling the times when he and Castle had worked together tracking Border hoppers. The moon-faced, likable young Border Patrolman had enjoyed his full trust, therefore his treachery was doubly hard to take now.

Castle was an individual, however. One could not blame the Border Patrol as a whole for the sins of one of its members. There had even been similar traitorous acts in the ranks of the Texas Rangers, but ninety-nine out of a hundred lawmen were thoroughly honest and dependable.

Despite what Castle had said regarding his own unimportance in the smuggling ring's organization, Hatfield believed that the corporal stationed at Guard Post A was the long-sought leak through which contraband passed out of Mexico into Texas. But that information, it would appear, had come too late to be of any use to the law.

The horses plodded on along the river-bank trail, working steadily downstream in a general southeasterly direction. Off ahead were the other Border Patrol guardhouses, each manned by an alert sentinel like Buck Castle. Whether they were faithful to their trust, or whether they, too, had been bribed by the smuggling gang to betray their country, Hatfield could not know.

The moon had risen, but was obscured behind an overcast. Alves appeared in no hurry to reach the half-way point between guardposts A and B, where he was to carry out his chief's grim death sentence on this prisoner.

The trail veered away from the forty-foot claybanks, to avoid a deep, narrow arroyo. When the horses reached the other side of the arroyo and the trail headed back toward the Rio Grande, the topography of the land changed from

THE BIG DIPPER

PIONEERS in early Texas found innumerable uses for gourds. Hollowed out, they made perfect containers and ideal dippers. No home was complete without a bucket of drinking water and its dipper-gourd next to it. Genteel folks did not leave the gourd in the bucket, since it would become soggy and overgrown with mold. Gourds were also used for milking and by boring a couple of holes in the bottom of one and tucking a piece of clean cloth inside, a useful milk strainer was fashioned.

A nice big gourd was a good receptacle for coffee, grain, sugar, salt, beans, peas, shelled corn, small fruits and so on. It was something of an art to cut out the top so carefully that it could be put back to serve as a lid. A housewife could grow her own kitchen receptacles, all sizes, right in her home garden.

brush to a heavy overlayer of glacial boulders.

What moonlight filtered through the overcast gave Hatfield a dim vista of the rocky slope which dropped at a roof-steep angle to the sheer jump-off above the river.

Here was as good a place as any to make his desperate bid for escape. Another mile, and Hatfield believed Alves would shoot him without warning. A wind was rising and it was doubtful if the sound of the shot would carry to the ears of the Border Patrolman manning post B, further downriver.

Loosening both boots from the ox-bow stirrups, Hatfield waited until Goldy had carried him into the shadow of a looming boulder to the left of the trail.

Then, with no advance warning in his posture as to what he planned to do, the Lone Wolf hurled himself out of saddle in a looping dive.

He hit the ground beside the trail on his knees. He heard Alves' yell of surprise, heard the click of the blacksmith's six-gun coming to full cock.

CHAPTER IX

Shot in the Back

LEAPING off the ground, Hatfield hurled himself wildly between two mammoth granite boulders. Alves' gun barked deafeningly behind him, the bullet striking a rock beside the Ranger's shoulder and ricocheting off into the night sky.

Handicapped by his arms being trussed behind him, Hatfield scrambled recklessly down the steep slope toward the Rio Grande's black gulf, zigzagging through the broken rocks. He heard Alves behind him.

This slope was too rocky for horses and the blacksmith had dismounted, slogging in pursuit behind him. Goldy chose this opportunity to stampede down trail.

Alves' gun exploded again, his slug setting up a wild clattering noise as it carromed from rock to rock.

The Ranger stumbled headlong on loose gravel and, without his arms to break his fall, crashed his skull into a protruding hunk of quartz. The blow all but stunned him, brought a warm drench of blood raining over his face from his cut scalp.

He forced himself to his feet, knowing his one chance was to retain his head start over the Lazy Ladder gunman. In this forest of boulders where light and shadow made crazy patterns, he was an elusive target.

On his knees, Hatfield scuttled desperately down the declivity, rolling over and over when a patch of loose sand opened up before him. The gag loosened and fell away from his mouth as he smashed through a low hedge of prickly pear cactus, and it helped to be able to suck air through his mouth.

Alves, wild with panic at having been outwitted, was vaulting rocks and sprinting at top speed to overtake him. Hatfield gave thought now to doubling around and climbing the hill, hoping to elude the blacksmith in this obscure light.

Loose rock gave way under his slogging boots as he sought to run parallel with the river. Despair touched Hatfield as he found himself skidding down a naked expanse of rock toward the rimrock overhanging the river.

Gouging his spike-heeled Justins into the shale at the bottom of the slope, Hatfield managed to halt his toboggan-slide toward the cliff brink. He pulled himself to his feet, and in that instant the full moon, bright and round as a silver *peseta,* cruised out from behind a fleecy cloud nest and bathed the malpais with its unearthly argentine glow.

Then Hatfield saw Alves sharp-etched against the sky not twenty feet above him. Moonlight glistened on the blued steel of the blacksmith's gun-barrel.

At this close range, Alves could not miss his target. At Hatfield's back was the empty drop-off to the river forty feet below. There was no immediate cover to right or left.

With cold precision, Alves rested his Colt over his upraised left arm, notching the sights on Hatfield's big shape.

There was but one thing to do, and that was dive off the rimrock, take his chances on hitting jagged rocks or yielding water far below.

Mouthing a shout of desperation, Hatfield lurched to the cliff's edge, preparing to jump. He saw flame spit from the bore of Alves' gun, up there on the slope, and the .45 slug caught him a raking blow along the back, the force of it knocking him bodily into space.

Stars and moon pinwheeled madly as the Ranger hurtled outward and downward. The glassy surface of the muddy river seemed to be zooming upward to meet his hurtling form.

Then he hit the river with a geysering splash, instinct making him suck a breath of air into his lungs just as the foamy wash closed over him.

The impact of his plummeting dive carried him deep, deep under the surface. The agony of his bullet wound was a numbing thing, seeming to paralyze his muscles, denying him the use of his legs.

WATER cushioned him as his body touched a sludgy bottom, tangled with water grass. Slimy spears of underwater plant life tangled his spurs and the sheer instinct of self preservation brought life to Hatfield's leg muscles. His kicking efforts to free himself from the entangling grasses stirred up a smudge of thick reasty mud.

Then his natural buoyancy carried him upward. Nearing the surface, the wash of the Rio Grande's sluggish current had its effect on his body, swinging him downstream.

The full moon struck his eyes as he surfaced in a smother of muddy foam. Treading water, the only recourse left to him since the rawhide bonds prevented any attempt to swim, Hatfield saw a little avalanche of rocks spill over the black rim of the claybank above and behind him, as Alves scrambled his way to the rim.

The blacksmith's eyes were searching the river for a trace of his victim. The current had thrust Hatfield under the beetling overhang of the north bank, and he was doubtful if Alves had seen him.

That same back eddy of water in motion enabled Hatfield to touch the muddy bottom with his boots. He let the current nudge him over into a thick clump of tules which furred the base of the claybank.

A wave of physical faintness made Hatfield's brain giddy. Drowning would be swift and sure if he fainted in this armpit-deep water.

To move meant sheer agony from the bullet furrow across his shoulder-blades. Grating his teeth against the pain, Jim Hatfield worked his way into the tules, finally falling forward on his face against a muddy shelf, head and shoulders out of the water.

His senses spun. Fireworks exploded in his brain. He believed he was safe from discovery here. Then oblivion blanked out the Ranger's sense of reality. . . .

When consciousness returned, the lower half of his body felt numb from prolonged immersion in the Rio's silty flood.

Struggling to climb higher on the mud shelf, Hatfield discovered that his arms were loose. He tugged and jerked, and to his surprise his wrists squirmed out of the knotted rawhide bonds, and he realized that the water had expanded the leather thongs, making them slippery and slack.

With his arms freed, Hatfield crawled up out of the water and sat down on a narrow ledge with his back to the clay wall.

Taking stock of his situation, his first emotion was surprise at the fact that the moon was far westered. He had been unconscious or asleep for most of this night. And the coming of daylight would bring danger to him, especially if Alves was not sure of his victim's death.

Hatfield tugged off his boots, emptied them of muddy water, and wrung out his socks. Then he stripped off his shirt and explored as best he could the bullet wound on his back.

The slug had nicked his right shoulder-blade, but otherwise had done no serious

damage. He realized that a miracle had saved his spinal column from fatal damage by the passing .45 missile.

Bullfrogs stopped their croaking in the nearby tules as Hatfield, having redonned boots and shirt, waded out into the shallow water and worked his way downstream along the bank's vertical base.

Full daylight must not catch him along this stretch of river. Even now, Alves might be patrolling the bank overhead in search of him or his corpse.

Rounding a bend of the river, Hatfield saw the opening of another side gulch, heavily thicketed with salt cedar and scrub willow. Hugging the bank to keep out of view of anyone on the trail above, the Ranger made his way into the arroyo and followed the thin trickle of a tributary creek back away from the river.

THE wicker of a horse somewhere in the willows up ahead startled Hatfield, made him realize the peril of his situation, caught without guns or any other means of defending himself. Crouching in the cedar scrub, he searched the black void ahead of him. Dawn was breaking outside and as its pink light slowly dispelled the roundabout shadows, Hatfield caught sight of his own sorrel stallion grazing in the pit of the draw not twenty yards ahead.

So far as Hatfield could tell, Goldy was alone, the saddle and bridle still on him. Alves might have abandoned the pony. On the other hand, Alves might be somewhere in the vicinity.

Hatfield waited a full hour before venturing out of hiding. Goldy headed up at his approach, then came trotting forward, steel-shod hoofs resounding on the gravelly creek bed.

No alien sound disturbed the deep quiet of this arroyo bottom. Was it possible that Alves was on his way up the river to Presidio, to carry out McInlay's orders concerning the brood bulls?

It was possible. Alves must have known his bullet had knocked Hatfield off the rimrock last night; the impact of the slug had been that visible.

Taking the long chance, Hatfield stepped out of the brush and joined Goldy. The golden stallion was rested now. Obviously the mount had come down into this arroyo in search of grass and water.

Tightening the cinches, Hatfield mounted and sent Goldy back along the creek, following the arroyo northward for two miles before it pinched out at a natural spring.

Dismounting, Hatfield crawled up out of the arroyo and had a look at the roundabout country. For miles in every direction was open land. To his right, a quarter of a mile away, was the railroad. Rio Vista was out of sight beyond a low rise to the westward, but Hatfield could see the smoke from chimneys against the enamel blue sky.

Returning to the spring, the Lone Wolf hunkered down for a pow-wow with himself.

To ride back to Rio Vista, less than five miles away as the crow flew, would be unthinkable in daylight. Reaching Border Patrol headquarters in the heart of town would involve showing himself to gunmen who would recognize him, whereas he would have no way of spotting his own enemies.

What day was this? After considerable mental gymnastics, Hatfield recalled that it was Tuesday. Castle had mentioned Wednesday night, tomorrow night, as the date when Alves would not be back to the Lazy Ladder Ranch.

That date tied in well with the time of the contraband shipment previously mentioned by both Curt McInlay and the Fort Pecos gambler, Jake Crespin. And as long as Buck Castle believed Hatfield was dead, it was doubtful if the smugglers would postpone or cancel their shipment north.

There was no immediate hurry in notifying Captain Linklater that Castle was a traitor, to be placed under immediate arrest as a conspirator of the smuggling ring. But there was a most urgent need for Hatfield to get back up north to the Lazy Ladder as soon as possible.

Up there, Hatfield had friends he could enlist to help him force a showdown with

the contraband runners. Sheriff Fred Gorham, for one; Colonel Ashton, and Jerry Preece for others.

The prospect of another day's journey under the blazing Texas sun, recrossing this bleak expanse of the Big Bend badlands toward Fort Pecos, appalled Hatfield. But it had to be done. Perhaps even now a smugglers' mule train was plodding northward toward the Lazy Ladder rendezvous.

Back in saddle, the Lone Wolf headed Goldy out across the open sagelands. The railroad was his best route toward Fort Pecos. By pushing hard all day he should reach the military town before midnight.

Contacting his sheriff friend, Fred Gorham, would be his first objective. He wondered if the faro man, Crespin, would still be alive by tonight. Buck Castle had dropped the grim hint that Crespin was under a death sentence from his own fellow owlhooters.

Picking up the arrow-straight right-of-way of the Border railroad's branch line to Fort Pecos, Hatfield settled himself grimly for the return journey facing Goldy and himself.

CHAPTER X

State's Evidence

FRED GORHAM, the sheriff at Fort Pecos, was getting old. He had never admitted that fact openly until tonight, as he wound up his midnight tour of Fort Pecos' trouble spots on Saloon Row.

With a complaining drunk in tow, whom Gorham had arrested for threatening to knife an off-duty soldier during an argument over a percentage girl at the Index Saloon, the salty old Texan entered the county jail in the basement of the courthouse. He tossed his prisoner into a handy cell to sleep off his jag, then wearily returned to his office.

He asked himself morosely, why had he taken on this job of policing a tough army town, when he had been pensioned off by the Texas Rangers eight years ago? True, the job wasn't too hard, what with the assistance he got from the military police patrols from the fort. But still, he was getting too old.

Like that rush trip out to the Rafter P ranch with Jerry Preece the other night he wasn't over the excitement of that ride yet. And the ominous mystery of the empty root cellar had weighed heavily on Fred Gorham.

Preece and his fiancée, Ellen Ashton, thought they had locked up a man who was either the Socorro Kid or Jim Hatfield, and in any event they wanted Gorham to tell them which. But their prisoner, with outside help, had escaped from the cellar before Preece and Gorham got back. What did it mean?

Boots thudded on the front steps. Gorham sighed heavily. That would be Nick, his deputy and night jailer, showing up late for duty again. Gorham looked forward to hitting the hay at his room in the Lone Star Hotel.

The door opened, but it was not the deputy who entered.

"Jim Hatfield!" exclaimed the old lawman, leaping to his feet to extend a hand to the hollow-cheeked apparition before him. "Is it you—or your damn ghost?"

The Lone Star Ranger grinned bleakly as he shook hands with his old friend. It had been months since they had last met.

"Feel more dead than alive, at that," he confessed. "I've been in the saddle since daylight, Fred. It's a long story."

Gorham said incredulously, "Was that you Jerry Preece and Ellen Ashton planted in the root cellar over at the Rafter P night before last?"

Hatfield nodded. His capture by Alves and Curt McInlay seemed like a figment from a nightmare, something that had never happened, a bad dream vaguely recalled.

"No time to go into that right now," he said. "Do you know a gambler here in town named Jake Crespin?"

"Sure. Works at the Index. Why?"

"Fetch him for me. He's in league with

this Big Bend smugglin' organization, Sheriff. Find some excuse to get him away from that saloon. And where can we give him a goin' over without interruption? Here?"

Gorham shook his head. "Better make it my room over at the Lone Star Hotel. Huh! Jake Crespin an owlhooter? Not that it surprises me. Listen, Jim. What lay back of you plantin' your badge on the Socorro Kid's corpse?"

Hatfield scowled impatiently. He understood his old friend's desire to have all these mysteries explained, but putting Crespin into custody before his smuggler accomplices cut him down was what counted now.

"I tell you, Fred, it's a long story. You get Crespin over to the hotel as soon as possible, and without attractin' too much attention. Tell him Buck Castle wants to see him. He'll come."

The two lawmen left the courthouse square. Hatfield had left Goldy, groomed and grained, inside the sheriff's private stable to rest up from the hard trek over the badlands from the Rio Grande.

Hatfield and Gorham parted company in the middle of town, the sheriff heading for Saloon Row to pick up Crespin, Hatfield making his way to the Lone Star Hotel on a secluded side street. He found the lobby deserted at this hour.

UPSTAIRS, using the latchkey Gorham had given him, Hatfield let himself into Room 18. He pulled down the window shades and lighted a lamp. The sheriff's bed was inviting, but even more so was the jug of buttermilk, loaf of bread and head of cheese on the sheriff's table.

Except for what food he had wolfed down at Buck Castle's guardhouse outside of Rio Vista, Hatfield had not had a square meal since his box lunch at Sumidero Wells, an eternity ago. He attacked Gorham's victuals with a starving man's relish.

Twenty minutes later Sheriff Gorham ushered the handcuffed figure of the Index faro banker, Jake Crespin, into the room.

"This is Texas Ranger James Hatfield, Jake," the sheriff said. "Not the Socorro Kid, as you may think."

Jake Crespin groaned and nearly collapsed. The sheriff helped prop him up in a chair facing Hatfield.

"You're lucky I'm *not* the Kid, Crespin," the Ranger said tersely. "When you shot the Socorro Kid by mistake the other night, your smuggler associates didn't like it. Buck Castle told me himself that they have to get rid of men who make mistakes. You were to have been bushwhacked, Crespin, by your own pardners. Your only chance is to come clean with us now."

Crespin's ghastly pallor took on a slight greenish hue. The gambler had known something calamitous was shaping up for him when an Index house man had visited his faro table and informed him that someone wanted to see him out front.

Arriving there, Sheriff Gorham had added to Crespin's terror by the whispered information that a man named Buck Castle wanted to see him over at the hotel. The fact that the sheriff even knew Castle's name was enough to convince Crespin that he had reached the end of his outlaw trail.

But this finding Jim Hatfield instead of the traitorous Border Patrolman waiting for him was the last straw. Crespin showed signs of a cracking sanity.

"You got me hog-tied for branding," the gambler choked. "I reckon I'm safer with you two John Laws than I would be with Buck Castle, at that."

Hatfield came down to cases at once.

"The kingpin you take orders from is due at Lazy Ladder with a contraband shipment tomorrow night, ain't he?" the Ranger demanded.

Crespin nodded, his eyes moist. "That —that's right, sir. At least that's what Curt McInlay told me."

Hatfield said sharply, "Who is runnin' this smuggling ring, Crespin? I'd advise you to turn state's evidence and tell us all you know. It's your one chance to keep from bein' sent to prison for life."

Crespin swallowed hard, staring first at the sheriff, then at Hatfield.

"I—I don't know!" he sobbed desperately. "That's the Gospel truth! I don't know. I've always had my orders relayed to me by Buck Castle or McInlay, sometimes by Miguel Alves. But they've never told me who the boss was. I—I just as soon wouldn't know anyhow."

Hatfield pursed his lips thoughtfully. Finally he said, "Spill what you know, Crespin. I've already got enough to hang you—for killin' the Socorro Kid in cold blood. And I'm not forgettin' you thought you was shootin' me."

CRESPIN was silent for a long interval. Finally, his face gaunt in the lamp shine, he began talking, in the deranged way of a man in delirium.

"Well, for several years I was the fence who handled the contraband shipments, here in town. Fences—buyers of illegal goods—would come from San Antonio and Amarillo and even as far away as Denver and Omaha to pick up the stuff."

Hatfield broke in, "Can you give me the names of those fences, Crespin?"

"Yes. You want 'em now?"

"No," said the Ranger. "We'll pick up your evidence later. Keep talkin'."

Crespin shuddered. "I'd collect the *dinero* for the contraband and turn it over to McInlay. He would meet the boss at a secret meetin' place over on the Lazy Ladder and they'd hide the contraband—hide it in waterproof iron boxes which they would sink in the quicksand *sumidero* over at the Wells until McInlay got ready to bring it into town here."

Hatfield felt his heart racing. For the first time in the years, he had been after the smugglers, he knew he was close to cracking his case now.

"Tomorrow night's meetin' between the boss and McInlay will take place at Sumidero Wells, then?"

"Yes," Crespin said faintly. "That's where they always meet. The quicksand is a surefire storage place for smuggled goods."

Sheriff Gorham entered the discussion. "You say you *used* to act as go-between for distributin' this contraband to buyers from outside of Texas, Crespin? You mean you no longer do that?"

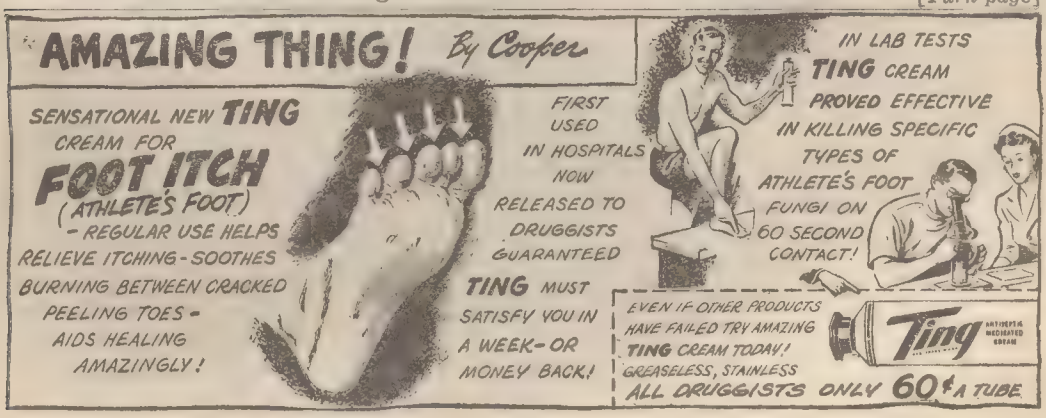
Crespin shook his head. "I made a mistake—a greedy mistake," the faro man confessed. "Remember that three-carat diamond stickpin you caught me wearin' that time, Sheriff? It checked with the description of a hunk of jewelry the Customs people knew had been smuggled into the United States without payment of duty."

The sheriff nodded. "You told me you bought it from a Mexican who wanted to buy chips at your gamblin' table. I couldn't prove otherwise, so I confiscated the diamond and let it go at that."

Crespin's face was drenched with cold perspiration. There was no doubt in the minds of either officer that the outlaw was telling them all he knew.

"Well, when the big boss down in Rio Vista found out about that, he decided I couldn't be trusted any more. I—I was afraid to leave town, knowin' I'd be hunted down and bushwhacked. I haven't had

[Turn page]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a thing to do with the smugglers until I got a code telegram from the boss, tellin' me that Jim Hatfield would be on that troop train the other night with the Socorro Kid. My orders was to drygulch Hatfield. I—I didn't dare not carry 'em out. You were the only lawman the boss was really afraid of, Ranger Hatfield."

Out of deference to the sheriff's curiosity, the Lone Wolf interrupted his grilling of the gambler long enough to explain how he had switched his badge to the Socorro Kid's coat, thereby giving Crespin a false tin star target at which to shoot.

The sheriff grinned. "I saw the body on the coroner's slab next mornin'," he said. "Knew it wasn't you, Jim, but I kept quiet so's not to give away whatever lone wolf deal you had on the fire. You should of let me know, though, before you headed out to the Lazy Ladder to look up McInlay."

THE Ranger smiled wearily. He was finding it increasingly difficult to hold his eyes open. For the time being, he had gained all the information he needed from Jake Crespin.

"The thing to do now is for me to lie low, Sheriff," he said. "The smuggler boss' meetin' with McInlay at Sumidero Wells will take place after dark tomorrow night, that's taken for granted. Any idea how many men will be with the contraband shipment, Crespin?"

The faro banker shook his head. "All I know," he said, "is that the big boss himself always delivers the contraband. He believes in keepin' the organization as tight as possible."

Hatfield turned to Gorham.

"I think Crespin should be allowed to go back to the Index Saloon," he said. "If he turns up missin' it might scare off our game. Do you have a deputy to make sure Crespin don't run out on us before tomorrow night?"

The Fort Pecos lawman nodded. "I'll deputize the owner of the Index to ride herd on Jake," he said. "But I don't think Crespin would take a chance on strayin'. Not when he knows he's marked for a knife in the back after that Socorro Kid business."

Hatfield started to shuck off his cowboots.

"I'll bunk here, if that's all right, Fred," he said. "And stay out of sight all day tomorrow. We can make our plans for the showdown at Sumidero Wells after I've caught some shut-eye. Right now I'm too groggy to know my own name."

CHAPTER XI

Signal From the Ranch

GORHAM pulled Jake Crespin to his feet and unlocked his manacles. Neither lawman had any fear of the faro banker trying to escape, whether guarded or not. Marked for death by his former owlhoot partners, Crespin preferred the penitentiary sentence he knew was coming.

"Anything else I can do, Jim?" the sheriff asked respectfully. Although this was territory under his jurisdiction, Gorham was tacitly putting this case in Hatfield's hands. "You'll want to sleep late tomorrow."

Hatfield gingerly pulled off his shirt to reveal the bloody track of a bullet across his shoulders.

"I'll want this scratch bandaged up," he said. "And say—is there any chance of my talkin' to Colonel Ashton and his daughter here in town tomorrow, without your goin' out to Lazy Ladder to bring 'em here?"

Gorham said, "The Colonel is sure to be here for the stock auction here tomorrow afternoon. Ellen most usually rides over with him. I understand young Preece wants to buy some blooded stock to build up his Rafter P herd."

A vast relief went through the Ranger at this news.

"*Bueno,*" he said. "After the auction, have 'em drift over here to the hotel. I want 'em to know what's goin' on at Lazy

Ladder before the lid blows off tomorrow night."

It was late the following afternoon when a knock sounded on the door of the sheriff's bedroom in the hotel. Jim Hatfield, answering it, found Ellen Ashton standing in the hall.

The girl was radiant and her eyes friendly as she shook his hand. She was wearing the same neat gray suit he remembered from their journey together in the troop train coach.

"Dad and Jerry will drift in singly, later on," Ellen said. "The sheriff has told us how things stand, Mr. Hatfield. He chatted with us at the stock auction over at the yards without its seeming suspicious in case any smuggler spies were watching."

Hatfield drew up a chair for the Colonel's daughter. A long night's rest had relaxed the haggard look on his face. He had bathed and shaved and was wearing a new shirt which the sheriff had obtained for him this morning.

In addition, the Ranger now carried two six-guns slung for cross-draw at his flanks, weapons from Gorham's extensive arsenal, to replace the .45s which Preece had tossed on the ground over at Sumidero Wells two days before.

"I got quite a start when I saw you in Dad's office, Mr. Hatfield," Ellen admitted. "I knew you were either Jim Hatfield or the Socorro Kid, of course, but I thought you must be the Kid because I'd heard about the shooting here in Fort Pecos. I don't mind telling you it frightened me, thinking Curt had hired an outlaw for the Lazy Ladder."

Hatfield laughed. "I'm mighty glad you didn't blurt out your suspicions when we were introduced," he said. "That sure showed presence of mind on your part. At that time I couldn't be sure you and your father wasn't mixed up with this smugglin' business."

They were interrupted by another discreet knock on the door. This time the visitor was Colonel Ashton himself.

"I still can't believe it," the Lazy Ladder boss said after Hatfield had made him comfortable in one of the sheriff's easy chairs. "My own foreman in league with the Big Bend contraband runners! Why, I've trusted Curt McInlay for years."

Hatfield inquired anxiously, "Did McInlay ride into town with you for the stock auction today?"

"No," the Colonel said. "No reason why he should. Hatfield, I don't mind tellin' you I am hopin' and prayin' you'll find that McInlay is innocent. I thought I was a good judge of men and horses. And I always judged McInlay as a man to ride the river with."

The Ranger smiled bleakly. "I'm afraid McInlay and your blacksmith are headed for prison," he said. "I've already had the sheriff telegraph the marshal over at Presidio to arrest Alves when he shows up to buy those breedin' bulls for you. That's the start of our renegade roundup, and we may smoke out other outlaws on your pay-roll before we're through."

JERRY PREECE showed up for the council of war a few minutes later. He still bore the livid bruises from the fist-pounding and gun-whipping Hatfield had administered to him over at Sumidero Wells, but his friendly grin indicated that he had forgiven the Ranger completely.

Not until Sheriff Fred Gorham had arrived did Jim Hatfield recount the full narrative of what had happened to him from the time he picked up the Socorro Kid at Linklater's jail in Rio Vista, to the present moment.

"Curt McInlay is goin' to meet the boss of the smuggler ring sometime tonight over at Sumidero Wells," Hatfield wound up his recital. "He is goin' to accept a routine contraband shipment and, in all probability, hide it in the quicksand for future disposal. I plan to be waitin' at the water-hole when the smugglers meet."

Young Jerry Preece hitched up his shell belts grimly and remarked, "And I'll be right along with you, Jim."

Hatfield shook his head.

"I'll want you and the sheriff within sound of a gunshot from the Wells," he

said. "But no closer. There would be too much chance of a slip-up in our plans if a group of us tried to reach the Wells without bein' spotted." Hatfield turned to Colonel Ashton. "I'll want to know exactly the moment that Curt McInlay sneaks away from the Lazy Ladder bunkhouse tonight. Could you arrange some kind of a signal that I could see from Sumidero Wells, to let me know when McInlay is on his way out to meet his smuggler boss?"

The old Confederate war veteran tugged his white goatee thoughtfully for a moment.

"I often read late at night," he said. "My bedroom is in the gable of the ranchhouse. I'll keep my lamp lighted until I see McInlay leaving the bunkhouse. When I blow out the lamp, you'll know my ramrod is on his way."

Hatfield thought this plan over and found it good.

"All right," he said. "I think that winds up our powwow. Before daylight tomorrow we should have the kingpin of the Border hoppers in custody, together with the evidence to convict him in Federal court. And you, Colonel Ashton, will have to rustle yourself a new ramrod, I'm afraid. Curt McInlay is through."

Colonel Ashton waggled his leonine head morosely.

"Jerry and Ellen are gettin' married next week," he said. "Kids, I might as well get somethin' off my chest. I'm gettin' too old to run a ranch as it should be run. I propose to combine the Ladder and the Rafter P, and let you run the whole works, Jerry."

As the Ashtons and young Preece stood up to leave, Ellen came forward and, pulling Hatfield's head down, kissed him soundly on the lips.

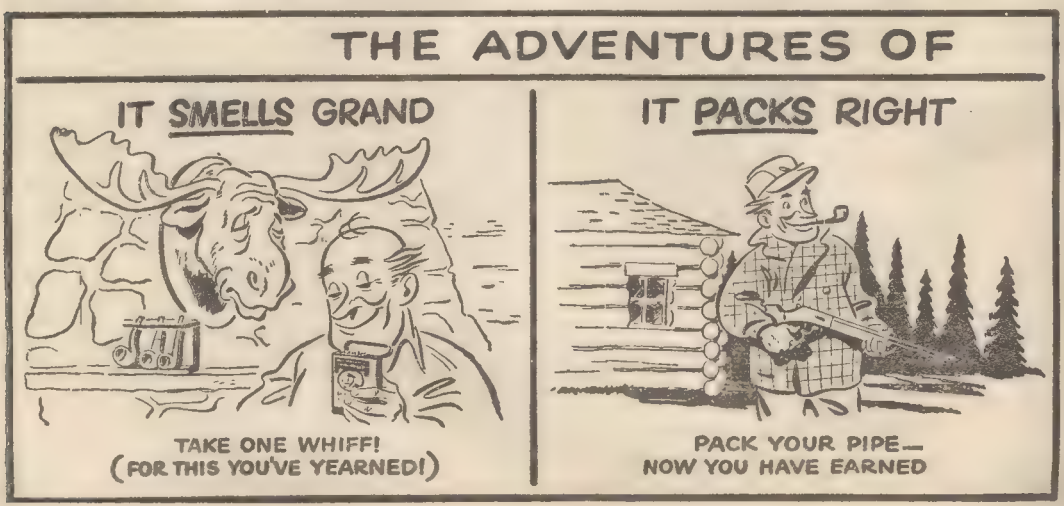
"Good luck, Lone Wolf!" she breathed fervently. "We know the danger you will be in at the Wells tonight. God bless you and keep you safe."

After their three guests had left the hotel, Sheriff Gorham regarded his Ranger friend gravely.

"I'd feel better if I had a ten-man posse backin' you tonight, Jim," he said. "What if that smuggler boss is sided by a gang of gunslingers? You couldn't handle 'em alone."

Hatfield said quietly, "The brush is too sparse around that water-hole to hide a posse, Fred. We're pretty sure the smugglers will approach Sumidero Wells from the south or west. With you and young Preece standin' by behind that hogback ridge to the north, I think we can cut it."

SHORTLY after sundown, Jim Hatfield left the hotel by an outside staircase. The sheriff had Goldy saddled and bridled, waiting in the alley behind the hotel. Gorham and Jerry Preece had already left town to take up their appointed station



behind the ridge overlooking Sumidero Wells.

The moon was not due to rise for another three hours. Taking advantage of the darkness, Hatfield left Fort Pecos by a side street and, avoiding the section line road which led to the Lazy Ladder, struck off across country in a beeline for the Cascabel foothill spur which marked the location of the smugglers' rendezvous at Sumidero Wells.

Two hours later, Hatfield was skirting Jerry Preece's drift fence. On the horizon to the south he could see the lights glowing in Colonel Ashton's ranchhouse and in the bunk shack.

Another hour's riding brought Hatfield within sight of the clump of cottonwoods marking Sumidero Wells. He approached the water-hole with extreme caution, on the off chance that the smugglers from Rio Vista might already be there.

Relying on Goldy's sense of smell to warn him of other horses concealed in the cottonwood bosque, Hatfield rode up to the quicksand bog, skirted the posts he himself had installed there, and before the moon lifted above the horizon to eastward he had concealed Goldy in a thicket of undergrowth.

His vigil began now. It might be the early morning hours before the unknown smuggler boss from the Rio Grande put in his appearance.

Seven miles to the eastward, Hatfield could see the glowing spark of lamplight marking the window of Colonel Ashton's bedroom in the Lazy Ladder ranchhouse. Over there at the ranch, Ellen and her father would be keeping a sharp eye on the bunkhouse, waiting for Curt McInlay to make his furtive departure.

North of the water-hole was the cactus-tufted hogback ridge behind which the sheriff and Jerry Preece would be hiding, waiting to lend him a hand at the showdown if need be.

The moon inched across the heavens on its preordained orbit, barely seeming to move. Somewhere far off a coyote clamored at the stars. Otherwise, a brooding, sepulchral quiet hung over the Texas landscape.

Bellied down in the heavy brush overlooking the quick-sand-rimmed water-hole, Jim Hatfield waited out the dragging hours, his eye fixed on the pinpoint of light that was Colonel Ashton's signal lamp.

Midnight passed. The hands of the Ranger's watch crawled past one o'clock, two o'clock, two-thirty.

It was ten minutes to three of this chill summer night when Hatfield saw the light wink out in Ashton's bedroom. A tingle of icy sensation rippled down the Ranger's spine as he caught the long-awaited signal.

Curt McInlay was on his way to keep

[*Turn page*]

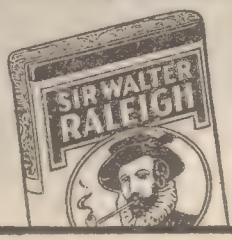
UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

—HAPPINESS FOR ALL CONCERNED!
—with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.



It costs no more to get the best!

his tryst with the Border hopper chief. Showdown could not be too far away now.

CHAPTER XII

Dead Ranger's Obituary

A SPECK of movement took shape off beyond the brow of the foothill spur southwest of the water-hole, around three thirty. Straining his eyes through the silver moonlight, Jim Hatfield made out the indistinct shape of three animals approaching Sumidero Wells.

Twenty minutes later the cavalcade was close enough for the Ranger to identify a lone rider on a powerful dun-colored saddle horse, leading two heavily laden pack-mules.

Hatfield's heart pounded with an excitement he could not control. Here, within range of his guns, was the kingpin of the smuggler ring which the government, including Border Patrol, had been trying to smash for more than a decade.

The smuggler moved in close to the quicksand area and dismounted, moonlight winking off a cartridge bandolier slung across his chest. Even at twenty yards' distance, Hatfield could not identify the contraband runner.

The pack-mules shied away at the edge of the quicksand. Thirsty though they must be from a day-long trek across the desert from Rio Vista, the wily mules were afraid of the treacherous, gray-crusted sands which denied them access to the glittering pool.

Ground-tying his saddler, the lone smuggler began removing metal boxes from the saddles of his two mules. That the boxes were extremely heavy for their size was indicated by the effort it took the *contrabandista* to drag them out onto the crust of the quicksand.

The smuggler's weight caused him to sink ankle deep in the deadly ooze before he slogged his way back to solid ground. As Hatfield watched fascinated, he saw the four iron chests gradually sink out of sight, the quicksand smoothing over their graves, leaving no trace of what lay beneath.

Hatfield knew that bedrock must be a couple of feet under the surface of the quicksand. Some quick work with a shovel would enable the smugglers to recover their contraband. What safer depository could the outlaws have found for their illicit merchandise? The fact that Sumidero Wells was on range owned by the Lazy Ladder was undoubtedly the reason the smuggler ring had planted Curt McInlay on Ashton's pay-roll. An accident of Texas geography had made Colonel Ashton's ranch a vital link in the Border-hopper set-up.

His contraband disposed of, the smuggler hunkered down on his heels and built a cigarette, his back to the Ranger lying motionless in the shadow-clotted underbrush.

"Waiting for McInlay," ran the thought through Hatfield's brain. And he would wait for the smuggler's accomplice to show up before calling a showdown.

The wind brought the steady *clip-clop* of a horse's hoofs across the prairie. Dawn was less than an hour away when Jim Hatfield caught sight of a rider approaching from the direction of the Lazy Ladder.

The smuggler tossed his cigarette into the water-hole where it made a hissing noise and got to his feet, drawing a six-gun as he waited for the lone horseman to approach within hailing distance.

Then, softly across the moonlit flats, Hatfield heard Curt McInlay's cautious halloo: "Chief?"

The smuggler boss called back an acknowledgement. Jim Hatfield came up to his hands and knees and carefully checked the cylinders of his twin six-shooters.

In moments Curt McInlay was dismounting alongside the locust fence posts which rimmed the water-hole. Hatfield heard a low exchange of voices as the two there shook hands.

"Yeah, Hatfield's dead—catfish bait in the Rio Grande," the Ranger heard the smuggler boss report. "Alves handled it."

HEFTING both six-guns, Jim Hatfield came to his feet with infinite caution, so as not to rustle the underbrush at his back. The two outlaws were in earnest conversation concerning the future disposal of tonight's contraband shipment.

"Jake Crespin has got to pay for that mistake that put the Kid in Boot Hill," the Rio Vista smuggler said in a louder voice. "I don't care how you do it, but see that that bungler is a dead man before sundown tomorrow, Curt."

Hatfield moved swiftly out of cover, his boots making no slightest sound on the soft sand underfoot. He had covered half of the intervening distance from the cottonwoods to the spot where the two outlaws were standing when one of the pack-mules caught the Ranger's scent and snorted an alarm.

"Elevate, both of you!"

Hatfield's steely voice paralyzed the two outlaws for an instant. Then they whirled to face the Ranger, hands plummeting to gun-butts.

Moonlight flashed on darting gunmetal as McInlay got his Colts cleared of holsters first.

"Hatfield!" bawled the Lazy Ladder ramrod in a frenzy of terror. "I thought you said he was catfish bait in the Rio!"

The thunder of McInlay's revolvers drowned out the man's shrill yell. Bracketed by whistling lead, Jim Hatfield squeezed off his shots from hip height.

Even as the big Colts bucked in recoil against his hands, Hatfield saw his slugs smash McInlay in the chest and knock him backward to the ground.

Terror took charge of the smuggler chief then. Without completing his draw the outlaw, his face a black void under the shadow of his sweeping sombrero brim, turned his back on Hatfield and sprinted toward his waiting horse.

Vaulting to saddle in a fast Pony Express mount, the owlhoot chieftain roweled the big dun into a gallop from a standing start.

For an instant, Hatfield had his gun-sights on the outlaw's big shape. Some innate sense of fair play held his trigger fingers immobile. He could not bring himself to kill a man from behind.

With a precautionary glance at Curt McInlay's sprawled corpse, Hatfield turned and faced the underbrush beyond the water-hole. His piercing whistle signal brought the highly-trained golden sorrel out into the moonlight.

Swinging into stirrups, Hatfield headed Goldy out past the stampeding pack-mules, in pursuit of the smuggler whose hoof-sore dun was streaking southward across the moonlit sage flats.

Responding to Hatfield's unaccustomed spurring, Goldy lined out in rocket-swift flight to overtake the escaping *contrabandista.*

As Goldy rapidly cut down the outlaw's lead, Hatfield saw the big smuggler twist in saddle, saw the spurt of bore flame from the outlaw's saddle carbine.

The Winchester slug made a lethal whispering sound as it missed Hatfield's ear by inches. He saw his target swing his horse off on another course, saw moonlight touch the Winchester's barrel as the smuggler fought to take aim on the pursuing lawman.

The six-gun in Jim Hatfield's right fist exploded, its violent echoes bouncing back from the foothill spur. As the wind of Goldy's flight whipped gunsmoke away, Hatfield saw his target rock violently in saddle and saw the carbine fly off into space to hit the ground with a ruffle of dust.

AS SLACK as a sack of grain, the outlaw spilled from stirrups, rolling over and over on the flinty earth before sliding to a halt against an ocotillo clump.

Hatfield reined up and slid from stirrups, guns palmed as he approached the sprawled shape on the ground. Blood was spilling into the sand, catching the ruby reflection of the westering moon. The Ranger's bullet had caught the smuggler in the ribs.

Kneeling beside the dying man, Jim Hatfield was not surprised to discover that it was the traitorous Border Patrol corporal, Buck Castle.

"You got—more damn lives—than a cat, Hatfield," the moon-faced smuggler chief panted spongily as blood clogged his windpipe. "Alves—told me he blew your brains out—dumped you in the Rio Grande."

Hatfield holstered his fuming Colt .45s. Remembering his long friendship for this traitor, he felt no sense of triumph in knowing that he had ended one of the most spectacular outlaw careers the lawless Border had ever known.

"Loyalty is somethin' you can't cheat, Buck," the Lone Wolf said gently. "It's nice to know the rank and file of the Border Patrol ain't rotten to the core."

Buck Castle's eyes were filming over. A macabre rattling noise was sounding in the depths of his bull neck.

"I—overplayed my hand—once too often, Jim," the dying traitor wheezed. "This—was to have been my—last job—"

Castle's breath gurgled out in a long sigh, and then his head relaxed against the ocotillos. As Hatfield came to his feet, he saw Sheriff Gorham and Jerry Preece pounding down the north slope toward the water-hole, where Curt McInlay's dead body lay motionless in the moonlight. . . .

HOURS later Jim Hatfield relaxed at Colonel Ashton's breakfast table. The sheriff had ridden on to Fort Pecos to put Jack Crespin in custody. From Crespin he would obtain the roster of illegal contraband buyers on whom the smuggling ring depended for their money.

"Buck Castle had the ideal job for a doublecrosser," Hatfield said musingly. "The river guards work two weeks and lay off one. During his lay-off periods Buck could make his monthly trips to meet Curt McInlay. As long as he had Captain Linklater's trust there was absolutely no way to plug that smugglin' leak."

Colonel Ashton smiled bleakly. "It's fortunate that Castle decided you were too dangerous to let live, Hatfield," the old man commented. "It was his baitin' a man trap with the Socorro Kid that brought all this about. But it's been a sad blow to me, knowin' McInlay and Alves were owlhooters. A man hates to have his confidence in anyone broken."

Stacked up in the Colonel's private office were the four metal caskets which Hatfield, with the help of a post-hole digger, had exhumed from the quicksand bog. Using keys they had later found in Curt McInlay's pocket, they had opened the boxes to find the evidence they needed to write off the Big Bend smuggling ring as a closed case—a fortune in illicit narcotics and counterfeit money.

"Jim, listen to this newspaper story," Ellen Ashton spoke up, looking up from a copy of yesterday's Fort Pecos *Inquirer* which the RFD mail man had left in the Lazy Ladder box that morning. "It's the account of how the murdered body of Ranger Hatfield was found in an alley behind the Index Saloon. But this is what will interest you most, I'm sure."

What she read aloud said:

> Hatfield's superior in Austin, Captain William (Roaring Bill) McDowell, was notified of the death of his ace Ranger by telegraph. McDowell wired the *Inquirer*:
>
> "The death of James Hatfield is an irreparable loss to the forces of law and order in Texas. Personally I loved Hatfield as if he were my own son. A finer man never lived; a braver Ranger never died in line of duty. His grave will be a personal shrine to me."

"How's that for a eulogy from your boss, Jim?" Ellen asked.

The Lone Wolf flushed. Remembering Roaring Bill's choleric temper, his utter inability to praise one of his Rangers even at the successful conclusion of a difficult case, Hatfield was deeply touched by this "post-mortem" tribute McDowell had unwittingly paid him.

"I don't know who'll be the most embarrassed about this—me or the Cap'n," Hatfield chuckled. "To postpone the evil hour, I think I'll accept your invitation, Jerry, to be best man next Friday at your weddin'. Until then, Cap'n McDowell can go on lovin' me like his own son."

●

Next Month: JIM HATFIELD in LOBO COLONEL

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Where could a person go out west to be sure of seeing some Texas longhorn cattle? —F.W.D. (N.J.)

A.—A herd of oldtime Texas longhorns has been preserved in the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge near Cache, Oklahoma, and a smaller herd in the Ft. Niobrara Wildlife Refuge near Valentine, Nebraska. I have also heard that some rancher in Texas has gone to raising longhorns instead of modern beef breeds, but I have not yet verified this report for sure. But in most of the west you will find longhorns as scarce as horse-drawn street cars in Hoboken.

Q.—Was Doc Holliday, gunfighting friend of Wyatt Earp, really a doctor?—Al B. (Calif.)

A.—J. D. (Doc) Holliday was a dentist who came west to Arizona seeking the sunshine cure for tuberculosis.

Q.—I thought the Cherry Cow Mountains were in Arizona, but I can't find them on any map?—Dick W. (Mont.)

A.—Those mountains that the cowboys call the Cherry Cows are actually the Chiricahua (Chee-ree-CAH-wah) Mountains in southern Arizona.

Q.—Where did the name "jerky" for dried meat come from?—C.V. (Mass.)

A.—Probably from *charqui* (CHAR-kee), a Mexican word for meat dried in the sun.

Q.—Is it true that frontiersmen and trappers of Kit Carson's time would sprinkle gall on fresh buffalo liver and eat it raw?—J.G.D. (Wash. D.C.)

A.—Well, I wasn't there to see them do it, J.G.D., but according to diaries and other authentic reports, they did so with great gusto. It seemed to keep them healthy, too, and free from scurvy and other vitamin deficiency ailments.

Q.—Just where was John Chisum's Jinglebob Ranch, so often mentioned in rangeland history?—A.T.S. (Idaho).

A.—Cattle King Chisum's cattle ranged all all over a huge section of the Pecos River Valley and adjacent country in southern New Mexico, but Jinglebob headquarters was at South Springs, a few miles south of the present Roswell, N.M., location of the big Walker Air Base for bombing squadrons.

Q.—I read about western ranchmen "caking" their cattle. What does this mean?—Dude (Conn.)

A.—To "cake" cattle means to feed them cottonseed cake, which is cottonseed meal in small, compressed chunks.

Q.—Do the Apache Indians now live on a Reservation?—F.F. (Md.)

A.—There are several branches of the Apache tribe now living on several reservations, such as the Mescalero and Jicarilla Reservations in New Mexico and the San Carlos and Ft. Apache Reservations in Arizona.

Q.—Do you believe that Billy the Kid was really shot by Pat Garrett, or did he escape to Mexico like in the movie played in some years ago by John Mack Brown and Wallace Beery? —C.B.B. (Calif.)

A.—I'm not old enough to have been around at the time (1881) but I have known and talked to many oldtimers who were, and I don't think there can be any reasonable doubt but what Garrett shot the Kid as dead as a chopped up chicken, and that the bucktoothed young outlaw's remains lie buried today at old Ft. Sumner, N.M.

—S. Omar Barker

by A. LESLIE

The LAW TAKES A TRICK

Cards stacked against him, Deputy Vane plays out his hand in a desperate game

THE eastbound stage rolled out of the mining town of Gila through a flood of early morning sunlight, headed for Shumla, the railroad town forty miles to the northeast. On his high seatbox, old Hank Mason, the driver, had his hands full keeping his four mettlesome horses from climbing the occasional trees that grew along the trail.

"You'll not be so darn frisky once we hit the hills," he told them. "We're packing a hefty load today."

Beside Mason sat Al Curtis, the shotgun guard, his twin-muzzled weapon across his knees.

Neither Curtis nor Mason thought the

shotgun would be needed on this trip, although the hefty load in the body of the lumbering coach consisted of silver high in gold content. For the stamp mill officials of the Montezuma Mine, mindful of gentlemen of easy conscience and with unconventional notions as to property rights, cast their silver in one-hundred-pound bricks. A metal ingot weighing one hundred pounds is not conveniently packed via horseback, and any other means of transportation was a mite too slow to chance under the circumstances. Texas sheriffs ride fast.

For more than three miles out of Gila the trail, traversing open rangeland, went down a rather steep slope. At the bottom of the long sag and just west of the hills, the old Chisos Trail joined with the trail to Shumla. The Chisos afforded a straight shoot to the Rio Grande and Mexico, nearly sixty miles to the south. It had formerly been favored by smugglers and wideloopers, but now it was little used.

Curtis and Mason had little fear of being molested here in the open country, even had they been packing a less unwieldy cargo. It was different in the hills, where the trail wound through thick chaparral and past gloomy canyon mouths. The hill country was hole-in-the-wall country, ideal for owlhoot operations. To the south were more hills and canyons of dubious reputation.

Just east of where the Chisos joined with the Shumla trail was a bristle of thicket a little way up the grade of the far sag. The grade was steep, and the horses slowed to a walk.

Taking advantage of the fact, Mason hauled his pipe from his pocket and began filling it. Curtis started rolling a cigarette.

From the thicket bulged five men, guns leveled at driver and guard.

"Elevate!" shouted the foremost, a big man with reddish whiskers, hot black eyes and flaming red hair.

Curtis instinctively dropped the half-made cigarette and clutched at his shotgun. The big man shot him twice. The guard's lifeless body toppled from the seat and thudded in the dust of the trail.

OLD HANK, eyes bulging with horror, shot his hands high into the air. One of the owlhoots gripped the bit irons of the off leader and brought the stage to a halt.

"Come down out of that," the bearded man ordered Mason. "And keep your hands right where they are if you don't want to eat lead. Move!"

Mason "moved," sliding awkwardly from the seat. The instant he hit the ground he was seized. His gun was plucked from its holster, and he was tied hand and foot and deposited beside the trail. The stage door was smashed open, and six silver bricks were hauled out. The bearded leader barked an order.

A man dived into the thicket and reappeared leading a string of mules bearing rawhide *aparejos*, or pack sacks. The bricks were loaded into the pack sacks, two to a mule so that they balanced, one on either side. Horses were led from the brush. The owlhoots mounted. The big leader tapped the stock of the rifle protruding from the saddle boot under his left thigh, significantly.

"Better not start yelling or trying to get loose before we're out of sight," he warned. "This saddle gun carries quite a ways. Be safer for you to lie still."

Mason lay still. Not until the troop had disappeared over a rise nearly a mile south on the Chisos trail, did he begin struggling with his bonds.

The driver quickly discovered that the man who had trussed him up hadn't done a good job. It did not take him long to wriggle his wrists free from the loose and clumsy knots. He whipped out a knife and slashed the cords that bound his ankles. Then, shaking with horror, he loaded the body of the dead guard into the looted stage, turned his horses and sent them toiling up the long rise and back to Gila.

The rumbling of the tires and old Hank's stentorian whoops quickly aroused the town.

"The Bartlett bunch, nobody else," Mason declared as he downed a drink.

"And you say they went south on the

Chisos?" demanded old Sheriff Couzens.

"That's right," replied Mason. "I watched 'em plumb out of sight."

The sheriff got busy. A little over half an hour later he stormed out of town at the head of a posse numbering every available man in Gila.

"They're headed for Mexico," said the sheriff. "Sift sand, boys, we got a good chance to catch 'em up before they make the river."

Shortly after noon, Deputy Sheriff Jim Vane unexpectedly rode into town from a routine official business trip. Vane was a tall, bronzed young man, a former cowhand. He had humorous gray eyes and a mouth that was grin-quirked at the corners. He spoke with a lazy drawl and his movements were usually slow and methodical. But when speed was essential, folks who knew him were wont to declare that lightning hung fire by comparison.

Vane was quickly informed of what had happened. He sought out old Hank Mason for additional details. He found him in the Ace-Full Saloon, seeking solace from liberal potations of redeye.

Mason supplied details, embellished with copious profanity. Vane listened, a little pucker showing between his black brows.

"And you figure it was the Bartlett bunch?" he asked when Mason paused to down another drink.

"I know damn well it was," declared Mason. "I seed Sime Bartlett once, before he took to outlawing. A feller ain't likely to forget that red-whiskered devil. I got a good look at him this time, too. It was Sime Bartlett himself who roped me up."

VANE regarded the driver, the pucker deepening between his brows.

"Sime Bartlett used to be a cowhand," he remarked. "He's hogtied many a half-grown steer for branding. He knows all there is to tying a knot. And you were able to get loose in less than ten minutes?"

"That's right," insisted Mason, staring at the young deputy. "My hands were hardly tied at all. He did a good job on my ankles, though. I had to knife 'em loose. Thought them rawhile thongs was going to cut 'em in two."

"Something darned funny about all this," said Vane. "They loaded two bricks to a mule and headed south. Mules packing that much dead weight sure couldn't make much speed."

"They had three extra mules," Mason reminded.

"That would be all right to spell the others when they got tired, but it wouldn't add to the speed," Vane replied. "And doesn't it strike you as funny, Hank, that they left you alive to see which way they took when they pulled out?"

"Why—why, I never thought about it," stuttered the old driver.

"Reckon the sheriff didn't, either," said Vane. "Looks like to me that they wanted you to see which way they went and pack the information back to town, which is just what you did."

Mason glared and cursed, and shoved his half filled glass aside.

"Don't you see it, Hank?" Vane went on. "Bartlett instinctively tied your ankles in cowhand style. You couldn't have wriggled 'em loose in a week of trying. He deliberately tied your wrists loose, so you could get 'em free. You know Bartlett's reputation. He's a snake-blooded killer and doesn't leave witnesses. And the bunch riding with him wear the same burns. It's mighty lucky for you that he had a reason for leaving you alive. Otherwise you'd have gotten the same thing poor Curtis got."

Mason moved uncomfortably in his chair, and mopped his suddenly damp brow.

"The way you tell it," Vane added, "they didn't have more than two hours' start on the sheriff. Those loaded mules couldn't make any real speed. Fast horses would catch them up long before they could hope to reach the Border."

"But if he didn't head for the Border, where'd he go?" demanded Mason. "Them mules would leave tracks and they'd stand out plain. No hiding 'em. The Chisos is soft and dusty and ain't used much any more. All the sheriff needs to

do is follow the tracks. If they turned off somewhere he'd know it. What's the answer, Jim?"

"I don't know for sure," Vane admitted, "but I think I'll take me a little ride."

"The nerve of those sidewinders!" growled Mason. "Pulling off that chore almost in sight of town, where we didn't have any notion anything like that would happen."

"Which was just what they figured," said Vane, standing up and stretching his long arms above his head. "The big question is, how do they figure to get away with those heavy bricks? I'm sure for certain they've got a scheme all worked out, and part of it was to send the sheriff riding a cold trail.

"But what I can't figure," he added, "is why they did that. If they'd just done for you fellers, they'd have had a head start—that is, if they're really headed for the Border."

"But when we didn't show up at Shumla on schedule, the telegraph would have been buzzing all through this end of Texas," Mason pointed out shrewdly. "The C and P south line to Mexico crosses the river not far from the Chisos Trail and there's a telegraph office down there. Folks would have been on the lookout for 'em."

"That'll happen anyhow, when the stage doesn't show at Shumla," Vane said. "Nope, there's more to it than that, Hank. Well, be seeing you. I'm going riding."

Old Hank and others watched Vane disappear down the slope, wondering what he had in mind.

"That young feller's got a head on his shoulders," Mason declared. "Wouldn't be a mite surprised if he ends up by giving the Bartlett bunch a surprise."

JIM VANE rode swiftly till he reached the scene of the holdup. Then he slowed his pace and carefully studied the ground. The narrow prints of the mules were plain to be seen, standing out from the broader hoof marks of the horses.

"And there go the sheriff's marks, lickerty-split," he muttered. "Pushing their horses as fast as they can go. They wouldn't notice anything so long as those mule prints kept running on ahead."

Vane set out to follow the prints, but at a moderate speed. He constantly scanned the country around, especially after the trail began flowing through the hills, with stands of chaparral shooting up from the floor of what was in reality a narrow valley walled on either side by steep slopes. From time to time the slopes were slashed by narrow side canyons, gloomy, brush-grown, studded with boulders and chimney rocks.

The sun slanted down the westward sky, disappeared behind the hilltops. Shadows began to gather. Vane muttered in disgust. Two more hours and it would be too dark to see the prints. Still they lead steadily south, scored by the iron marks of the posse's speeding horses.

The mules were traveling at a pretty good rate, judging from the spacing of the prints, but Vane saw that they could not hope to reach the Rio Grande ahead of the posse.

"Yet they keep on going," he growled. "Say—hold it a minute, Rojo. Something funny here all of a sudden."

He pulled his big roan to a halt, dismounted and bent over the hoof marks. Scanning them closely, he walked slowly down the trail. Abruptly he straightened up, his eyes glowing.

"Not near so many down here as farther back," he told the roan. "Horse, I believe I've got it. Somewhere back up the trail, they turned off the loaded mules and kept the others going down the trail. Just about half the prints down here as farther back, I'd say. Chances are that just one or two of the hellions turned off with the loaded mules. The rest kept on south to make a trail for the sheriff to follow. Now we've got to find where they turned off. Shouldn't be over hard."

Still on foot, he backtracked. He had covered but a few hundred yards when he reached the point where the narrow prints thinned out. It was directly opposite the mouth of a narrow canyon with

perpendicular rock walls and heavily overgrown with brush. But there were no prints leading into the canyon.

Vane studied the ground closely, and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"An old trick, Rojo, but one that'll usually work, if the other feller isn't keeping his eyes sharp," he said. "Carefully brush out the tracks with a leafy branch. That's what they did with those left by the loaded mules. And the canyon floor is hard and rocky and would leave mighty few marks. Uh-huh, that's what they did. Up that canyon somewhere is their cache, sure as shooting. It's up to us to find it. Come along, feller, but take it easy. If they hear us coming, we're liable to get a hot reception."

He rode slowly into the canyon. For some distance there was no sign that anybody had passed that way, but on a softer bit of ground he discovered tracks, quite a number of them.

"Some of 'em old, some of 'em plumb fresh," he muttered. "They've been using this hole-up for quite a spell. These mule tracks were made only a couple of hours ago. Horse, I figure it's about time to leave you behind for a spell. Your irons clicking on the rocks would be heard quite a way, and I've a notion this trail is hot."

Pushing into the encroaching brush a little way, he discovered a cleared space where grass grew. A small spring yielded a trickle of water. Vane hobbled the roan and left him to graze. Then he returned to the trail and stole silently up the gorge. Suddenly he halted, sniffing sharply. To his sensitive nostrils had come the unmistakable tang of wood smoke.

"Got a fire going," he breathed. "Uh-huh, a hole-up in here, sure as blazes. Got to take it easy."

A faint rustling in the growth to his left brought his head around, an instant too late.

FROM the growth shot a snaky coil. A loop whisked over the deputy's shoulders and was instantly jerked tight with a force that swept him from his feet and tumbled him to the hard ground with bone-jarring violence. All the breath was knocked from his body and he lay there half stunned. Before he could make a move, two men leaped from the brush and swarmed over him. Scant seconds later his hands and feet had been secured by rawhide thongs that were drawn so tight as to cut into the flesh. Staring upward, still slightly dazed, he sighted his captors.

There were two of them. One was squat and brawny with a stupidly vicious face. The other was tall, lank and bony, with keen eyes. He gazed down at the captive.

"Darned if it ain't old Couzens' chief deputy," he exclaimed. "Thought the boss said he was over to Pecos, out of the way."

"Well," snarled the short man, "you can see he ain't. Let me plug him, Curt, like I wanted to do in the first place, and get it over with. You're plumb loco, handling things like you do."

"Uh-huh," replied the other, "and you figured the boss was loco when he ordered us to stay down here and keep our eyes open. The boss don't miss no tricks, that's why he's boss. And I don't aim to miss none either. Plugged bodies is liable to be found, no matter how good you hide 'em, and give a lead to the feller what did the plugging. And killing lawmen is bad business in this state. The way we'll handle it, nothing won't ever be found, and even if it is, there'll be no proof of what was done. Haul that jigger onto his feet and let's get going. Getting late. Never mind his horse. It's holed up down there somewhere. We'll root it out tomorrow and get rid of it. Come on, we got things to do."

Hauled erect, Vane swayed dizzily. The tall man loosened the thongs about his ankles and arranged them hobble-fashion to allow him to take short steps. A gun muzzle, prodding his back significantly, urged him up the gorge.

Ten minutes of trudging and the pair shunted him into a narrower side canyon. A little later, by the fading light, a tall cliff loomed up, at the base of which

showed a dark opening. Scattered about were several old cabins.

The pair paused in front of one of these. Vane's guns and his knife were removed. The short man carried them into one cabin. He returned a few minutes later with a bundle that he handled gingerly. Vane instantly recognized it as a half dozen capped dynamite sticks. In his other hand the man carried a coil of fuse and a lighted lantern.

"All right, feller, into the mine tunnel over there," ordered the tall man, prodding Vane with his gun muzzle.

Vane obeyed. There was nothing else to do. Into the damp and dripping tunnel he went. He hesitated as the dank, chilling air struck him, but the prodding gun muzzle against his back moved him on.

"Don't want to get rough if we don't have to," said the tall man, "but I'll bend this hogleg over your head and carry you, if necessary."

The matter-of-fact tone in which the statement was made convinced Vane that the man meant just what he said. He hobbled on without further protest.

They followed the tunnel for a hundred yards or more, till a dark opening broke the damp glisten of the side wall.

"In there," ordered the tall man, holding up the lantern.

Vane shuffled into a little gallery apparently hollowed out of the living rock of the mountain. The instant he entered, the short man kicked his feet from under him and he crashed on the rock floor.

The wantonness of the attack sent a red blaze of anger surging through him, and he went into action, bound though he was. He jerked his knees up and, as the short man bent over him, kicked him in the stomach with both feet.

The man shot backward, his breath exhaling in a gigantic *whoosh!* He thudded to the floor but bounded to his feet again like a rubber ball, panting and cursing, and hurled himself onto the deputy as the tall man leaped forward.

Vane butted the big fellow in the jaw with his head and sent him sprawling. For a few moments the little room was filled with a whirling pinwheel of arms and legs and fists and feet. The overturned lantern flared and sputtered in a corner, casting grotesque, dancing shadows over the rock walls and ceiling. Curses, grunts and yelps of pain split the murky air. Jim Vane was fighting like a twine-tangled wildcat.

BUT the odds were too great. A crashing blow against his jaw half stunned him. Fingers like rods of nickeled steel closed about his throat. Other fingers gripped his thrashing ankles. The rawhide thongs were jerked tight and knotted. Gasping for breath, his head whirling, Vane lay still.

His captors, panting and swearing, got to their feet. The short man glared down at him with murderous rage, but in the other's eyes was a grudging admiration.

"Sort of hate to do to you what we're goin' to," he panted. "You're sure a first-rate fightin' man. Uh-huh, plumb salty."

"He won't be so salty a little later," snarled the short man. "Come on, we got a chore to do."

Muttering and grumbling, the pair got to work. "It's one hell of a wonder this damn dynamite didn't cut loose and blow us all to Mexico," the short man growled as he uncoiled the fuse. "All capped like this. Cut short lengths of fuse and I'll crimp 'em onto the caps. Then we'll tie 'em to the long one we'll stretch down the tunnel."

Slanting his eyes sideways, Vane could see that the back wall of the shallow gallery was drilled with holes. Evidently the chamber had been prepared for a shot when the old mine was abandoned, many years before, because the gold content of the rock was no longer worth working.

The two owlhoots loaded the holes with the dynamite sticks and tamped them tight. They stepped back and surveyed their handiwork. Vane could see four snaky lengths of fuse dangling from the holes. These were quickly attached to the remainder of the coil.

"Plenty to reach to the end of the main tunnel," said the tall man as he unreeled

the coil gingerly.

"I got two sticks of powder left," said the other.

"Leave 'em alongside the wall," said the tall man. "They'll make for a bigger bang. The first jar will set 'em off, capped like they are. Careful how you handle 'em, you horned toad! It don't take much to set off capped dynamite, and you know it."

"What I still don't understand," said the other, "is why they didn't go off while we were havin' the ruckus with that hellion. All right, let's go. We got that Cibola chore to do yet tonight. I'm goin' to cook a surrounding and eat before we ride, even if them damn bricks stay in the mill till hell freezes over."

"Shut up!" snapped the tall man. "You always talk too much. I reckon it'll be all right to eat before we leave. I'm hungry, too. But if we're late, Bartlett will slit our throats and shove our legs through 'em. We won't light the fuse till we're ready to ride, in case the whole darn cliff takes a notion to tumble down. We'll light her and hightail."

The short man favored Vane with a vindictive glare. "So long, lawman," he said. "Wonder how you'll feel with a sizable hunk of mountain on top of you?"

The pair retreated to the main tunnel, trailing the long length of fuse behind them. In the corner, the wan glow of the forgotten lantern seemed to accentuate the blackness of the crawling shadows. The sound of footsteps died away down the tunnel. A ghostly silence settled over the old mine, broken only by the steady plash of drops of water falling into a shallow pool against the side wall of the room.

Jim Vane had plenty of sand in his craw, but for a moment he was enveloped by a wave of mad panic. With every ounce of will power, he fought the urge to scream and shriek and thrash about. Finally he won the fight and lay panting and exhausted, forcing himself to think coherently.

He figured that he had half an hour of grace at the most. If he could not, in that short time, work out some plan of escape, he would be crushed beneath countless tons of rock when the dynamite let go.

GRIMLY he began working on his bonds. But the men who tied him knew their business. The tough rawhide did not give the fraction of an inch despite his tugging and straining. It cut into his flesh till wrists and ankles were a fiery agony. Cold sweat popped out on his face. His mouth and throat were dry as leather. With an inward shuddering he strained his ears to catch the first hissing that would signal fire eating along the fuse.

He thought he heard a sound in the outer tunnel and lay rigid, glaring toward the opening through which would come the crawling snake of fire that was death's messenger. But the silence persisted, save for the steady splash of dripping water.

The liquid sound revived his scorching thrist. "Blazes, what I wouldn't give for a drink," he muttered. "Maybe I can make it to that pool. It's only a few feet off."

He began to inch his body toward the pool, writhing and flopping. Sharp juts of rock scratched and bruised him. He slipped and slithered on the damp surface. It seemed to take years to cover the few feet of downward slope to the pool. The attempt caused him to abandon the thought that he might be able to roll far enough down the tunnel to escape the blast. He knew he could never do it. Doubtless the explosion would bring down most of the cracked and seamed tunnel roof.

Finally, after an eternity of effort, he reached the pool. He twisted his head around and got his lips against its surface. The water was bitter with mineral salts, but it was drinkable and delightfully cool. He essayed to jerk his bound wrists into it in the hope that the coolness would assuage the burning pain of the thongs eating into his flesh.

It did help, and after a moment or two it seemed to him the cords did not cut so deeply. Numbly he wondered why. Then across his fogged mind blazed a

recollection of what every cowhand knows, often to his discomfort and inconvenience—*rawhide stretches when wet!*

The sudden surge of hope was almost sickening in its intensity. With it came a flood of revived strength. Vane plunged his wrists deep into the pool and sloshed them about, tugging and straining.

The bite of the acid water set up a new flame of agony in his chafed and lacerated wrists. but he grimly endured it, for the rawhide was undoubtedly stretching.

But the minutes were racing by like leaves in a storm, though in terms of pain endured they were sky-stretching eternities. Vane strained his ears to catch the ominous hissing sound that would come at any instant. He could almost wriggle one hand from the bonds, now, but not quite. Frantically he concentrated on his efforts.

Suddenly he heard it, the sibilant note as of an angry and approaching snake. He put forth every atom of his strength. The rawhide cut into his wrist. The band of pain thinned as the drenched thong stretched like rotten rubber. A mighty jerk and the hand came free.

Vane flopped about. In the very doorway of the rock chamber appeared a glowing ember and a shower of glittering sparks.

Floundering, scrabbling with his bound feet, Vane reached the advancing flower of fire. He gripped the fuse with numbed fingers and tried to pinch it out. There was no time to get his ankles free and he could not possibly squirm far enough along the outer tunnel, before the blast would let go.

The spurting sparks blistered his fingers, but the tight fuse resisted his efforts. His knife was gone, and to jerk the fuse loose from the caps would be madness. The ends of the short lengths were bound to the main fuse with rawhide thongs. He thrust the fuse between his teeth and chewed frantically.

The tough fibre gave slowly, but it gave. His teeth cut through the outer covering. A shower of sparks gushed against the roof of his mouth and seared his lips. The fire raced on.

He lunged forward and gripped the fuse almost to where it was bound to the short lengths. Again he chewed, his mouth full of blood, the burns smarting unmercifully. Choking, gasping, he tore at the stubborn fibre.

It gave, ripped apart, hung by a frazzly strand. Vane put forth all his strength in a wrenching jerk.

The fuse parted. The rain of sparks fluffed out in a last angry spark. Utterly exhausted, Jim Vane sank to the floor and lay like a dead man.

PAIN brought him back to consciousness, pain that flowed through his body in fiery waves. It seemed to him that his tormented body belonged to someone other than himself. But the pain centered and whirled in a brain that was surely his own. Sick, trembling, he sat up. After ages of fumbling he got his ankles free. Then he rubbed and massaged them until the blood tingled and needled through his body and he could stand.

Swiftly his strength returned. For long minutes he stood in the entrance to the chamber, peering and listening. No sound came up the tunnel. Resolved on a definite course of action, he glanced about for something that would serve as a weapon. His gaze fell on the two capped dynamite sticks lying beside the end wall.

"This'll do," he muttered as he picked them up. "If those two devils are still out there, somebody else will get a taste of being blown up."

He doused the lantern and hooked the bail over his arm. Then, the dynamite clutched ready for throwing, he stole down the tunnel on noiseless feet. At the mouth he halted to look out and reconnoiter the clearing.

He could dimly see the bulk of the cabin. It was dark. So were the other ramshackle buildings near by. No sound came to his ears, but he caught the smell of coffee and burned wood. All remained dark and silent.

For several minutes longer he waited, however. There was a chance that the

unsavory pair had waited at the side canyon for the explosion. When the dynamite didn't let go, they might come back to see why.

But after a few more minutes, Vane decided they had not tarried. Judging from their remarks, they had scant time to keep their rendezvous with Sime Bartlett, the leader of the band, and the tall man had given a good idea of how Bartlett would deal with tardiness.

Still watchful Vane approached the cabin and cautiously shoved open the door. Nothing stirred in the dark interior. He entered, closing the door behind him, fumbled a match and lit the lantern.

The glow showed a disordered room with bunks built against the wall, a few home-made chairs and a rough table. On the table were the remains of a hastily eaten meal. A coffee pot stood on the still faintly warm stove.

Almost the first glance showed Vane a number of large bricks of frosty looking metal stacked against the wall.

"There it is!" he exclaimed exultantly. "The silver stolen from the stage. My hunch was a straight one."

Another glance showed him his own guns lying on the table. He dived for them, made sure they were loaded and in perfect working condition, and holstered them. New confidence flowed through his veins, now that he was armed and set to do battle.

There was hot coffee in the pot on the stove. Vane thankfully poured a cup and gulped it down. A couple more and a mouthful of bread and meat from the table and he felt fit for anything. As he ate he did some hard thinking.

"All plumb clear, now," he told the coffee pot as he poured a final cup. "I see why they wanted to get the sheriff and his posse out of town and away off somewhere. The sidewinders aim to make a try for the monthly clean-up of the Cibola stamp mill. Almost as big as the one they got this morning from the Montezuma Mine. The Cibola mill sets out by itself, east of Gila. Today is pay day for the rock busters and the mill workers. They'll all be in town, drunk and raisin' hell, with only a watchman or two left at the mill. It would be a cinch for a bunch like Bartlett's. Well, we'll see if we can put a crimp in that little scheme. But it will take some hustling."

He tightened his gunbelt a notch and glanced around the cabin. As an afterthought he tied the two sticks of dynamite together and took them along, although packing capped dynamite on horeback was a rather ticklish chore.

"Might come in handy," he muttered, "and after what I went through in that infernal hole, I sort of hanker to blow somebody up tonight."

BEFORE leaving the gorge, Vane snooped about a bit. Under a lean-to, contentedly munching their fodder, he found three mules. With a nod of satisfaction he hurried down the canyon to where he had left his horse. The roan had not been molested. Vane mounted and sent him down the canyon at a good pace.

Midnight had come and gone and the great clock in the sky was wheeling westward when Vane's tired horse toiled up the slope to Gila. He crested the rise and only a few hundred yards ahead loomed the gaunt buildings of the Cibola stamp mill. Vane reined in his horse and for a moment sat scanning the mill and evolving a plan of action. Finally he dismounted and stole forward on foot, being careful to keep in the shadow and take advantage of all the cover that offered.

With the utmost caution he approached the mill. It was dark and apparently deserted. Not even the lantern of the night watchman was visible. From the town came sounds of revelry, but the mill stood silent in the gloom.

Vane went forward a few more steps and halted, tense and rigid. From the dark front of the mill came a low mutter of voices. He stole ahead again and in another moment made out a huddle of men just outside the open door.

"Go fetch the mules, Curt," he heard a gruff voice say.

Jim Vane stepped boldly into view. In his left hand was a cocked gun. In his right was the bundle of capped dynamite. His voice rang with authority as he called:

"In the name of the law! Elevate! You are under arrest."

There was a yelp of alarm. Then, as Vane slewed sideways, a blaze of gunfire. A bullet nicked his left arm. Another ripped the shoulder of his shirt. He jerked his right hand back and hurled the dynamite straight at the shooting owlhoots.

There was a flare of yellow flame, a terrific roar. Vane was knocked off his feet by a hurricane blast of air that howled about him. Dazed, deafened, he dimly heard a scream of agony knife through the uproar. He scrambled to his feet as earth, stones and other debris rained about him.

From the gloom and the swirling smoke cloud gushed a lance of fire. Vane felt the wind of the passing bullet. Instantly he fired in return. Again the hostile gun blazed, and in the glare Vane sighted a bearded face streaked with blood and contorted with rage.

"Bartlett!" he gulped, firing as fast as he could pull trigger. "Can't nothing do for that sidewinder!"

Back and forth through the smoke clouds streaked the lances of flame as the pair blasted death at one another. Near by sounded the braying of terrified mules and the screams of equally frightened horses.

Another scream sounded, a scream ending in a bubbling shriek. Vane was suddenly aware that no more red flashes were storming toward him. He lowered his smoking gun and stood peering and listening. Above the noises made by the frightened animals he could hear a growing clamor of shouts as men rushed from the town.

Jim Vane glided forward, slowly and cautiously. He stumbled over something. Peering down he saw it was the mangled body of a man. A few more steps and he came upon Sime Bartlett, blood still dribbling from his bullet-torn throat.

Men from the town were running up, some carrying lanterns.

"This way," Vane shouted, "Bring a light."

Another moment and a crowd was jostling around the remains of the Bartlett owlhoots. Other men were prowling inside the mill.

"Here's the silver bricks, stacked outside the door, four of 'em," a voice shouted.

"And here's the watchman," called another voice from the mill. "His head's cut but he's alive."

The crowd outside volleyed questions at Vane. He answered tersely.

"And now I want half a dozen jiggers with horses and guns to ride with me down to that cabin and pack back the silver stolen from the stage," he said. "This may be all of the bunch here, but we're not taking any chances. Somebody get me another horse. Mine isn't fit to

[*Turn page*]

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travel any more tonight. Hustle up. I'm going over to the Ace-Full for a snack and some coffee."

IT WAS midmorning when the recovered silver was finally stacked in the sheriff's office. Vane threw a tarpaulin over it and, after a good wash and a bite to eat, sat down in the sheriff's chair and drowsed comfortably while awaiting the return of his superior.

Sheriff Couzens got in shortly after noon, dusty, tired and in a very bad temper. He glared at his deputy as if Vane were personally responsible for his trouble.

"Have any luck?" Vane asked innocently.

"No," growled the sheriff. "The hellions give us the slip. We trailed 'em to within fifteen miles of the Border. Then they turned west, and then turned back north. They were still headed north when it got so dark we couldn't follow the trail any longer. So we camped out for the night. My back's plumb busted from tryin' to sleep on a rock. Come morning we started following them blasted tracks again, and finally lost 'em when they turned into the Comanche Trail from the west. I'll be darned if it didn't look like the horned toads were headin' back to Gila."

"Reckon they were," said Vane. "They sure got here, all right."

"What you mean?" yelped the sheriff. "Where are they now?"

"Down to the coroner's office, what's left of 'em," Vane replied.

The sheriff gulped and goggled. "And—and the silver?" he stuttered.

Vane gestured to the tarpaulin. "Have a look," he suggested.

The sheriff had a look. Then he sank into a chair and stared dazedly at the deputy.

"Jim," he pleaded, "won't you tell me what in blazes happened?"

Vane told him.

The sheriff shook his head in wordless admiration.

"Jim," he said at length, "I'm not aimin' to run for re-election this fall, and I got a plumb good notion who's going to be the next sheriff of this county.

"And," he growled, but with a twinkle in his eye, "I hope you get a smart deputy that'll make *you* look like a dumb sheepherder!"

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HE THOUGHT HE WAS A *HORSE*

by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Baldy Joe Collins, the Liar West of the Pecos, once knew a feller who... but let him spin the yarn!

GREEN cottonwoods rustled dreamily in a little breeze that whispered down the stretch of sun-shimmered alkali forming the main street of Golondrina. Six charter members of what had been called the Spit and Speculate Club felt its coolness and roused, in a measure, from their lethargy.

The screen door of the post office slammed. A man with saddle-bowed legs emerged, lifted his Stetson to swab perspiration from a head that resembled the cue balls in Hank Miley's Pool Hall and Billiard Emporium, and jingled his spurs toward the group.

Miley saw him coming and tilted his chair back comfortably against the bole of a cottonwood.

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"Hey!" he warned in a loud whisper. "Here comes the Liar West of the Pecos. Don't nobody say nothing that will get him started on a story. Let's see if the baldheaded old coot can sit here five minutes without spraining his tongue avoiding the truth."

A delighted snicker approved the scheme. Ike Mulhall looked around for a stick, found none and began whittling on a pool hall chair. "Soapy" Saunders rolled a cigarette reflectively. Jim Malone and "Tascosa" Turner drew their Stetson brims over their eyes and began to snore. Miley and "Panhandle" Pierce gazed vacantly out into the mesquite flat beyond town, where occasional whirlwinds twisted dust into the burning sky.

"Baldy Joe" Collins, who hailed from Langtry, sank into a chair with a sigh. His home town had nurtured Roy Bean, famed as "Law West of the Pecos". Baldy Joe's title as Liar West of the Pecos was fast becoming as well known as his predecessor's.

"Howdy, boys!" he greeted. "Kind of hot, ain't it?"

MILEY recognized the weather as a dangerous topic. Baldy Joe could talk weather from the blizzard-swept Panhandle plains to the sub-tropical Gulf. According to him, he had seen it so hot in Del Rio that the lizards scorched their bellies as long as they could stand it, and then ran the bullfrogs out of San Felipe Creek. The pool hall proprietor hastily agreed that it was hot, and then changed the subject.

"Nice horse you're riding, Baldy," he said, eyeing the roan the Liar West of the Pecos had left to switch flies at the hitching-rack.

"Yeah," drawled Baldy Joe. "That's a mighty smart cayuse, too. Mighty smart. I hope to herd sheep in the hereafter if that horse can't dang near talk."

He swabbed his brow again and glared around the assemblage. They were on dangerous ground now and they knew it. Doubtless Baldy Joe had owned a talking horse at one time or another. Tascosa and Jim Malone snored audibly.

"That horse," volunteered Baldy Joe, "is named Cadwallader Jones."

Nobody, it seemed, cared what the horse was named. Baldy's blue eyes glared some more. Then he cleared his throat, a danger signal.

"Named him that because he's so much like a man. Yes, sir, he can do everything but talk. I reckon maybe if I was to split his tongue, he could up and carry on a conversation in English or Mex, just as well as anybody."

Tascosa Turner was forced to slap at a fly, but he followed up the movement by a more insistent snore to prove that he wasn't interested. Soapy Saunders flicked away his cigarette stub and yawned. Panhandle Pierce chose a red ant for extermination and let go an unerring stream of tobacco juice.

"But that's neither here nor there," Baldy Joe went on. "As I said, I named him Cadwallader Jones, who was the first man I ever knowed that thought he was a horse."

This caught Hank Miley off his guard. He cocked his best ear toward the Liar West of the Pecos. "Thought what?" he demanded.

"Thought he was a horse," Baldy Joe repeated mildly. "At that, I sometimes figure that Cadwallader Jones was a horse —for awhile, anyhow."

Miley's chair came down from its tilt, and Panhandle Pierce choked on an involuntary swallow of tobacco juice. There was no escape.

* * * * *

Cadwallader Jones (said the Liar West of the Pecos) was a big, bullnecked hombre with a long horse-face, who used to prod cows with me over on the old Ninety-nine spread. I reckon Cadwallader never knowed his own strength, but I've seen him take a couple of rambunctious yearlings in a branding pen and knock their heads together to quiet them long enough to slap the iron on them.

With all his strength, Cadwallader was

a simple kind of buzzard. He'd believe nearly everything you told him, and the boys used to load him something terrible. But Cadwallader was plenty good-natured.

I recollect the time "Four-eye" Farnham come riding in and told Cadwallader he had found some gold ore over on the Rafter Up range, which was adjoining the Ninety-nine on the south. This was the worst thing Four-eye could have done, because, as it turned out later, Cadwallader Jones wasn't the only hombre who took it plumb serious.

Four-eye was a skittish sort of gent who wore green specs and didn't have no business on the ranch. He was always jumping from one thing to the other like a grasshopper on a hot rock. Just then he was all wrapped up in what he called ge-ology. He toted a little hammer around with him and knocked chunks off'n the rocks, and he was an untruthful sort of gent, too. Why, I hope to drink sheep dip in the hereafter if that hombre didn't tell us that them rimrocks around there showed that the Ninety-nine had once been an inland sea!

Well, Four-eye wasn't a regular cowhand but a sort of friend of the boss from back East, so we had to put up with him. And when he showed Cadwallader a couple of pieces of rock with some shiny stuff in them, why Cadwallader went spreading the news around that Four-eye had found gold on the Rafter Up.

This was a bad thing to do, because at that time we was having more or less trouble with the Rafter Up rannies. I'll explain how it come about that that gold story got Cadwallader into trouble. But in the meantime, Four-eye got himself throwed off'n a horse that wasn't any wilder than me, and took up a new hobby.

THE new idea Four-eye cornered behind them green glasses was that the mind is more powerful than the muscle, and that if he studied himself some hypnotism he could ride any horse that ever slobbered on a water trough. Just by looking them in the eye and letting them know who was the boss, he could ride them, Four-eye figured. So he sent away and got a book on hypnotism.

Well, Four-eye studied up on this book for about two days and knowed everything in it. He was going to tackle a mean, dish-faced roan we had in the corral, but we didn't want to see him killed, so we switched horses and put in another roan that had lost all his teeth in one of Jeb Stuart's charges when a bullet hit him in the mouth.

Four-eye couldn't see so good, so he never knowed the difference. He looked that horse in the eye while we sat on the corral fence and nearly busted from trying not to laugh. He climbed on the old nag and rode him twice around the corral, then proclaimed that he could hypnotize anything.

Cadwallader Jones took him up on that. "You can't hypnotize me," said Cadwallader, and Four-eye took off his specs and looked Cadwallader in the eye.

"Close your eyes," Four-eye said. "Now they're closed tight and you can't open them. Now you are becoming drowsy. Now you will do anything I say."

"Well, sir, I hope to card sheep wool in the hereafter if it didn't work! I reckon that ride around the corral on what he thought was a vicious bronc give Four-eye the confidence he needed. Because, sure enough, Cadwallader was hypnotized.

"Cadwallader," said Four-eye, "you are a horse! Open your eyes, Cadwallader! You are a horse!"

At that, Cadwallader opens his eyes and rolls them around like a broomtail when you are trying to sneak up on him with a hackamore. Then he started snorting and pawing the corral dust, and the boys and me laughed so we nearly fell off'n the fence. We was laughing so loud at Cadwallader thinking he was a horse that we never heard a bunch of hombres riding up behind us.

Then somebody yelled: "Reach, you shorthorn scrubs!" and we turned around to see Pecos Patterson, who owned the Rafter Up.

Well, I figured it was a joke, and I said,

"Look, Pecos—Cadwallader thinks he is a horse." And Pecos said, "Never mind that, where is that four-eyed hombre that found the gold on our range?" Right then I seen we was in trouble.

It was plumb easy for Pecos to pick out Four-eye Farnham, and that's what he done. They dropped a loop around Four-eye's head and knocked off his specs, and then they slammed him on a horse and took to the tules, firing a few shots just to let us know they meant business.

This sure left us in a fine mess, because here was Cadwallader still trotting around the corral, neighing now and then, or lifting his head over the fence to nicker at the salt trough. One of the boys yelled at him and then we all yelled at him, and he didn't pay no more attention to us than if he was a horse.

Well, we sat on that fence for an hour or two, figuring Cadwallader would wake up. But he didn't. I tried to get close to him and argue him out of it, and he kicked up his heels and snorted at me, shying over on the other side of the corral. I picked up Four-eye's green specs, and it was a dawggoned good thing I did, or Calwallader would have starved plumb to death.

What's that? I'm coming to that, how a pair of specs had to do with him eating. But first I want to tell you that that first couple of days was plumb awful, with nobody able to get anywhere near Cadwallader Jones. He tried to bite the foreman, and when I went across the corral with a saddle on the second day, why Cadwallader went plumb loco and butted into the picket fence.

We seen something had to be done pronto, because here was Cadwallader not eating and running himself to death. We rode over to the Rafter Up and told Pecos Patterson we had to have Four-eye back. But they was hiding Four-eye out somewhere until he told them where that gold was. And Pecos sighted over a .30-30 that was poking out of a window and told us he didn't give a good goldang if we all turned to sheep after we was horses for awhile.

So we figured that we would have to humor Cadwallader and treat him like a horse. The first thing we done was to rope him, and he put up a pretty stiff fight before we could get him snubbed up to a post. But he was getting weak from not eating, by this time.

Now we took Cadwallader toward the house and managed to get him in the kitchen. He sniffed at the frijoles and bacon, and ate one lump of sugar, rolling his eyes around all the time and mistrusting all of us. When he kicked over the stove we took him back outside, and he lit out in a gallop for the barn.

WELL, sir, I hope to herd sheep in the hereafter if that hombre didn't smell oats. It may sound strange, but that's what he wanted, and he lit in on the oats in one of them bins till I figured he was going to founder. Then he drunk a lot of water and went cavorting around the corral again.

How's that? No, Cadwallader didn't ever try to use his hands. He ate and drunk just like a horse, and when he run it was with a gallop that sent his red hair tossing just like a mane.

I reckon there must be a lot of nutrition in them oats we feed horses, because Cadwallader done all right for the next few days. But then he started getting a little peaked, and that's where them glasses come in.

You see, I was leading Cadwallader toward the house one day, and he strains against the rope—we had a hard job fixing a proper hackamore for him—and starts cropping some green grass. I got the idea then and there to feed Cadwallader some things that looked green.

So I put the green glasses on him and dumped some shoestring potatoes in his bin. Cadwallader ate them with a lot of relish. The next day I give him some spaghetti and he ate that, too. But I hope to make mutton gravy in the hereafter if that hombre didn't seem to crave grass. So one day I led him down into the little horse trap by the windmill.

Well, I staked Cadwallader out down

there and let him graze while I read that there book on hypnotism, figuring that maybe I could dehypnotize him after I learned what to say. And then it happened. I know it sounds mighty queer, but I hope to wear sheep ermine in the hereafter if it ain't true. Cadwallader Jones ate some loco weed and pulled that stake out of the ground like it was a radish.

Yes, sir, the first thing I knowed about it, I heard a snort and looked up from the book to see Cadwallader jumping a four-strand bob wire fence without scratching a hoof. He went clattering down through the mesquites, tossing his mane and neighing like all get out.

We didn't see nothing of Cadwallader for a couple of days. Then we found him. He was running with the wild bunch—coming down to a waterhole in the evening and taking to the high ridges in the daytime. The stake rope was wore to a frazzle, and we judged that Cadwallader had done a right smart bit of traveling, because his boots left a track that looked like they was about to play out.

One of the boys figured the least we could do was to rope Cadwallader and shoe him. We decided that maybe Cadwallader was a whole lot happier as a horse. He had lost them green specs I put on him, and his clothes was getting torn, but he looked mighty healthy and powerful when you would see him standing on a rise with his neck arched and his nose upwind. Then he would trumpet, and away would go the wild bunch, with him faster than any horse in the herd.

But we caught him, and I'll tell you how. We built brush wings into a canyon that run into the hills where an old trapper's shack had been, and we strung out and run the whole wild bunch into that there canyon—up through the brush "V".

When Cadwallader seen he was trapped, he was fit to kill. We let all of the wild bunch come past us as we closed in, but when Cadwallader tried to come out of the canyon, we moved up with a dozen riatas swinging, and he was done for.

Well, you probably have seen how a horse acts when he knows his wild days are over and he's doomed to be broke to the saddle. If you get them young enough it's all right, because they don't know no different. But Cadwallader was full grown, and he'd had a taste of running with the broomtails, and you could see it was busting his heart to think of being saddled and rode.

So Cadwallader whirled again and went clattering up to the very head of that canyon, where this little shack was—the one the old trapper had used. And when we come in closer, he lowered his head and pawed the ground and slobbered all over the rocks. Then he up and kicked that cabin wall in just like it was a card house.

Well, sir, I know it sounds mighty strange, but I hope to sleep with the woolies in the hereafter if it ain't true. Inside that cabin was Four-eye Farnham, all tied up like a calf!

YOU see, them Rafter-Up buzzards had kept him there and told him he was going to stay put until he told them where the gold was. Which he couldn't do because there wasn't no gold.

Now we throwed about six loops on Cadwallader and took dallies around our saddle-horns, and we busted him on the ground so hard it knocked the wind out of him. Then we cut Four-eye loose and told him he'd have to do something about Cadwallader thinking he was a horse.

Well, Four-eye done it, all right. He went up to Cadwallader and fixed his eye on him.

"Cadwallader Jones," he said in a plumb deep voice, "you ain't a horse. You're a man, Cadwallader!"

And then he made a pass in front of Cadwallader's face, and I know it sounds mighty like a lie, but I hope to herd sheep in the hereafter if it ain't true. You could see Cadwallader coming out of it—that wild look going out of his eye, his hair looking a little less like a mane and the arch leaving that bull neck.

Then he up and spoke, and at first we

was dawggoned glad to hear his voice. Four-eye was repeating: Cadwallader, you ain't a horse!" when Cadwallader up and said: "The hell I ain't!" and let go a powerful kick that took Four-eye right back of the ear and laid him out.

I reckon it was because Cadwallader wasn't quite out of the woods yet—like when you're half woke up and something happens—because after he kicked Four-eye he calmed down and was normal. I knowed him a long time after that, and he was a dang good puncher. So I named this horse after him, because this here roan comes as near being a man as Cadwallader did a horse.

* * * * *

Another little breeze rustled the cottonwoods. Baldy Joe Collins wiped his brow and looked at a hunting-case watch he laboriously pulled from his pants pocket.

Then he glared around the assembled Spitters and Speculators. Hank Miley accepted the challenge.

"Of course, Baldy," he said, "we don't doubt your word. I've seen hypnotists a couple of times in shows. But if this here Four-eye Farnham was so good at it—if he could hypnotize a man for keeps like that—then why didn't he become kind of famous at the business?"

Baldy scratched his dome, replaced his Stetson and rose to go.

"Well," he drawled, "I'll tell you how it was. You see, all the while Four-eye was laying there in that shack he was worrying about Cadwallader being a horse. It was on his mind when he was kicked. Now this sounds mighty strange, but I hope to live on lamb stew if it ain't true—that there Four-eye never had good sense after he was kicked on the head. When he come to, Four-eye thought *he* was a horse! Yes, sir, and he run with the wild bunch until one day, being near-sighted, he run off a bluff down on the Pecos and busted his neck."

Ignorance Was Bliss

IN the early days of Texas there were few roads and no road maps. A new arrival from the east to a small Texas town thought it would be a good idea if he took his horse and buggy and did a little exploring to acquaint himself with the country.

He started out and followed his nose, winding in and out of the creek bottoms and exploring likely looking tracks and trails until the sun started down the western sky and he began to think about getting back to town. Then he realized that he didn't have the foggiest idea which way the town was.

He wandered around for awhile at random, getting more and more worried and hoping to run across some familiar landmark.

Then he saw a pony standing hipshot, head down, drowsing near a tree. And under the tree, sombrero cocked over his eyes, was a ragged Mexican youth.

The townsman drove up and stopped but he had to call several times before the youth removed the sombrero from his face and sat up, yawning.

"Which way is the town?" the man asked.

"Don' know, señor," the boy said, shrugging.

"Well how far is the nearest town and which way is it?"

"I never been there, señor."

"Well where does this road go?"

"Go noplace, señor, ees always right here."

"Well where is here?" the man demanded in exasperation.

"Eef it has a name I do not know it," the boy replied.

"You certainly are a fool!" the man said angrily. "Don't you know anything?"

The boy shrugged. "Maybe I don't know anything. but I am not lost," he pointed out with a grin.

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Both guns were fired, the echoes running out across the prairie in tumbling rolls of sound

THE LAND OF GOMORRAH

THERE were the four of them who went out that morning from the Rafter L—old Alec Larsen, the two Larsen boys, and young Carl Benton. Of the four, only Carl came back. He stood before Mrs. Larsen and the girl Laura in the kitchen of the sod house, his eyes on the rough plank floor, his Stetson in his hand.

"They caught us in a dry wash," he said in a flat, hushed voice. "A dozen or more of 'em. We saw Black Antell once, but never got a shot at him. We held 'em off a couple of hours till we ran out of shells. The boys were dead then, and Alec was dying. He said to get out and tell you two to make a run for it."

Mrs. Larsen sat down and placed her

Carl Benton knew he didn't have a ghost of a chance against Black Antell's hired guns—but he stayed on

red, calloused hands on the table. "They talk about law and justice. They're so proud of their new courthouse and their county officials. But what good have they done us?"

"None," Laura said, "and they won't. We've got to go, Ma."

"There isn't much time," Carl pressed. "They didn't kill three men for nothing. Antell wants this place and your springs, and he's aiming to get it. I'll go hitch up—"

"No." Mrs. Larsen looked out of the kitchen window to the long swell of the prairie, softly green now, for the spring was bringing life to the buffalo grass that had been a dull brown carpet for so long. "Three years we've worked here, hoping and praying and sweating. The new county hasn't done anything but give Antell protection."

She rose and walked to the window, shaking her fists at the distant huddle of buildings that was the town of Hope. "They call it Hope. It's a blasphemy. All the evil of the world is there. It should have been called Gomorrah, and if there is a God, he will destroy it with fire and sulphur from Heaven, like the Bible says."

"Ma," Laura cried, shocked.

"If there is a God," Mrs. Larsen repeated.

CARL stirred uneasily. She had always been a pious woman, going to church regularly in the new town of Hope. But she was not pious now. In that instant she was a strange woman filled with hate and bitterness, a woman Carl had never seen before.

He said, "We've got to go—"

She whirled on him. "To starve somewhere again? Me and Laura with nothing but the clothes on our backs, and a team and a buckboard?" She shook her head. "I'm done with it. Let Antell kill me."

"I won't go without you," Laura cried. "You know that, Ma." She turned to Carl. "You go. You're a man. They'll kill you, but they won't hurt us."

You're a man! She had said that, but she had never acted before as if she knew. Well, she didn't know, not really, and he was not one to talk. He had drifted in the fall before and they had given him a home. He had learned to love them, even tough old Alec Larsen who was bucking a pat hand but was too stubborn to quit.

"I'll stay," he said, and thought of his empty gun.

"You can't." She put her hands on his arms, blue eyes searching his long face, burned brown by a desert sun. "We'll move to Hope and I'll find work. We'll be all right. You go on now."

Mrs. Larsen had dropped into the chair again. She was crying, her head down on her big arms. It was the first weakness he had ever seen in her. He brought his eyes back to Laura. He wondered if she really knew what lay ahead if she stayed. Antell would let them go if they ran, but if they stayed, he would hound them in ways known only to a man like Black Antell. Regret was like a knife in Carl Benton then. He should have killed Antell months before, but old man Larsen had held him back.

"We'll let him alone," Larsen had said. "There's law here now. He's made his threats, but he ain't doing nothing. I figger he knows his ways are done."

But they weren't done. Ways like Black Antell's were never done when small men let themselves be ruled. That was the trouble, but Alec Larsen had not understood. He had believed in something, and his belief had brought him nothing but death.

Laura was shaking Carl. "Go on. There's nothing you can do for us." Tears came and ran down her cheeks, and that seemed strange to Carl, for he had never known a woman to cry unless her tears were designed to bring a man's favor to her.

Carl said, "I'll stay," and went out of the sod house.

He stared up at the sky, sharply blue, and felt the cutting edge of the wind. He thought of Larsen's cattle and horses that had been stolen, of the new sheriff's futile efforts that had not been meant to catch the thieves.

He went on to his horse and led him into the shed, pulled off the saddle and fed him. This was a good horse, a leggy buckskin that had carried Carl a million miles, or so it seemed. Sometimes he hadn't been very far ahead of the law, or of men who wanted to square a private account with him, but the buckskin had always taken him to safety.

He went back outside again, eyes searching the prairie for horsemen. No one in sight.

He felt like laughing, but he didn't. It would have been a crazy man's laugh. Well, maybe he was crazy. He should have pulled out a month ago when he saw how it was shaping up. He could have kept going this morning instead of coming home.

Home! He said it aloud, his eyes pinned on the ugly sod house, set here on the prairie like a lump of gray earth with grass growing from the roof. Last summer Mrs. Larsen had planted flowers on the roof and they had been blooming when he'd first ridden in, hungry and razor-thin and so tired he could hardly stay in the saddle. A flower bed on a roof! Now that was something to laugh about.

WHY DID he stay now? No one was in sight. There was still time to get out. Maybe Antell wouldn't touch the women. He did laugh then. Yeah, he was crazy. He'd seen men like Antell. He knew what they'd do. Mrs. Larsen wouldn't sign the place over to him. She was as stubborn as old Alec had ever been, but before Antell was done, she'd sign.

No, Carl would stay, although he couldn't have told anyone why. They'd done something to him, these Larsens—good people in a world that had never been kind to Carl Benton. He went back into the house, and standing by the front window, emptied his gun of the spent shells and dropped it back into his holster.

Laura was beside him, standing so close that her shoulder touched him. "They'll expect to find us gone, won't they?"

He said, "Yes," and looked at her. Funny what a slim yellow-haired girl can do to a man who thinks he's tough. Carl Benton was tough enough, but she didn't know. It wasn't anything he could tell her, even if he had been the braggy kind. He couldn't shatter the dreams of a girl who had strict ideas about what a man should be. This man should be solid. Dependable. Willing to put his hands to a breaking plow and turn the sod. He should have ideas about churches and schools, about a home and children. And most of all about other men who take human lives.

So Carl was staying, and he would die. Maybe it wasn't just for Laura, or because he had promised Alec Larsen that he would take care of the women. Maybe it was for himself. A man dies but once, but he may die in his thoughts a thousand times, or wish he was dead so that he can be at peace. It is the shame in a man that brings the thousand deaths, the shame of having run because he was afraid. Carl had seen how it worked—men who drank themselves to death, or put a bullet in their brains, or took others' lives in a vain effort to forget.

Laura laid a hand on his shoulder. "What will they do, Carl?"

He said, "I don't know."

He wished now he had told her a long time ago that he loved her. It was no time now with his clock run down. Whatever happiness she might yet find in life must not be shadowed by the death of a drifter who had stopped long enough to learn to love her.

There was no sound but that of their breathing and of Mrs. Larsen's crying. Five minutes? An hour? Who knew? There was no measuring of time. He was thinking of another woman crying because her husband had been killed. Pennsylvania instead of Nebraska. A coal mine explosion instead of Black Antell's bullet. His mother instead of Laura's.

There were other pictures in his mind. Of standing proudly in the country schoolroom and reading aloud to a grim-faced schoolmaster. Of his mother dying of typhoid. Of the judge binding him over to a farmer. Of his running away, the twisting and the dodging, the fleeing and

the hiding. The West! A job here, more miles, another job, and through it all a hungry stomach that was never quite filled and a growing cynicism, a conviction that unless a man took what he wanted, nobody would ever give him anything.

Now this. A stubborn old man who wouldn't sell and wouldn't run. "Somebody's got to stand for the things that are right," Alec Larsen had said. "Maybe it's just us now, but there'll be others, little people with a plow and a small herd. They'll be safe because we made it safe."

It was all right. A man died but once, and this was as good a day for death as any. He saw them coming then, five of them. Without a word he kissed Laura, a strange kiss, for suddenly she was clinging to him, her arms clutching him. He pushed her away and went outside.

He stood in front of the sod house and watched them come, the bright sun to his back, the wind that had swept across the empty miles touching him and sweeping on across more empty miles. Only five of them. He wondered about that. Black Antell had had his whole bunch that morning. Then they were closer and he saw who they were, and he was surprised. Antell was in the front, a bearded, stud-horse of a man who had a talent for squeezing and shaping others to his own will, everyone but the Larsens.

There was just one of Antell's men with him, a lanky blue-eyed man who packed two guns, low and tied down in the fashion of men who lived by the gun. Tex Lenhart, he called himself. Carl had seen many like him along the Border. It was the others that surprised Carl. They were the little men, the kind who judged themselves to be honest, but nevertheless little men. Not of body, but of soul and heart and courage, the men who let themselves be shaped by Black Antell because he had the strength to shape them. They were the doctor and the judge and the sheriff.

AS THEY rode up, Carl was thinking of something else far back in his life, not so long if judged by years, but an eternity if measured by all that had happened. Days make months and months make years, but that is no way to tell a man's age. Carl Benton was only twenty if figured by the tape measure of recorded time. But in this case it was no true gauge. Not for this drifter who had been transformed by love. He was as old as time.

He was remembering how he had trudged through the snow to the churchhouse with his father and mother. A very long time ago, but it was in his mind now, clear and sharp. Of going to Sunday School and being taught by the schoolmaster, his face softened by the task he had assumed. Carl was remembering the Bible stories, so long forgotten. He knew what Mrs. Larsen meant when she had said the town of Hope should have been named Gomorrah, the evil city that had been destroyed along with Sodom.

But there was a difference, and as he thought about it, hope stirred in him—the kind of hope that must have prompted the naming of the new town. They were not evil, these people, just weak. The evil stemmed from Black Antell, and if he was gone, the evil would go.

They rode up and stopped, and Black Antell threw his great head back and let out a booming laugh. "It's the kid drifter, Mike. I didn't think he'd be here. Arrest him. He was with the Larsens when they ambushed us. I lost three men, and I'll see him hanged."

Carl knew then why Antell had come this way. Not with his wolf pack, but with the respectable men who could talk to the Larsen women if they had not fled.

Carl said, "That ain't the way it was, Sheriff. Antell's outfit ambushed us and killed the Larsens. I'm the only one who got away. Arrest him for murder."

They shifted uneasily, the three weak ones, for this meant a mental decision, and they were not capable of it. Not with Antell's dark shadow upon them.

The big man laughed again. "He's lying, Mike. Arrest him. Then we'll see if the women are here. They'll listen to you, Judge, when you tell them we need the spring water for the town. It's gone too long now."

"It's gone too long for a fact," Carl said. "You've sold your souls." He motioned to the three. "You're in hell, and you'll be in hell till you give Antell what he's got coming. Then you'll be free."

"No use listening to his gab," Antell said. "Take him to town, Mike."

But the sheriff didn't stir, and the judge said, "Let him talk, Antell. Maybe we should have heard him talk long ago."

"I've got one thing more to say." Carl was cold inside, cold and empty as any man must be who asks for death, but there was a chance now. "If it had been like you say, Antell, I'd have kept on running, but I came back. I'll tell you why. I aim to kill you if you'll give me the shells. My gun's empty."

"Now this ain't—" the sheriff began.

"I reckon it is," Antell boomed, and plucking five shells from his belt, threw them at Carl. "He's making this personal. If he wants to commit suicide, I'll accommodate him."

Carl loaded his gun. He had expected it to go this way, for there was a great pride in Black Antell, the pride of a man who never thinks of failure, and so is certain of his own gun speed. Besides, it was to his advantage to kill the drifter who had not run when he had a chance. It would be easier to deal with the women inside the sod house. Antell had seen their faces pressed against the front window. Given time, he would gain what he sought, but he was not a patient man.

The medico, scared, cried out, "There's been enough bloodshed, Mike. Stop it."

Antell swung out of the saddle. "No. He lied, saying my boys ambushed the Larsens. I won't let a liar like that live."

Carl's gun was back in holster. That was the way with men like Black Antell. He had power and wealth, and when you combine that with gunspeed and cold, calculating brutality, you have a Black Antell. Courts might miss. A man might break out of jail. The weak ones might feel enough shame to rebel, but a gun in an expert's hand did not miss.

It would be another object lesson for these three solid citizens who must be kept in line, the big man undoubtedly figured. But there was one thing Antell did not know. Sheer necessity to stay alive had made Carl an expert with the gun.

ANTELL took two steps away from his horse, bearded face expressionless. then his hand swung down. He was fast, but not fast enough to swap lead with this hungry drifter. Both guns were fired, and Antell, a bullet in his belly, folded and fell forward, shocked both by the fatal impact of the bullet and by surprise.

Carl was hit. His chest was numb; he fought with his tortured lungs for a breath, and kept his feet. He turned his gun on Tex Lenhart, for the job was not yet finished. A lieutenant may take a captain's place, so he must die.

Lenhart reached frantically for his gun and pulled it, but his horse, spooked by the gunfire of the moment before, began to pitch. He missed his shot, but Carl did not. Lenhart came out of the saddle, slamming to the ground.

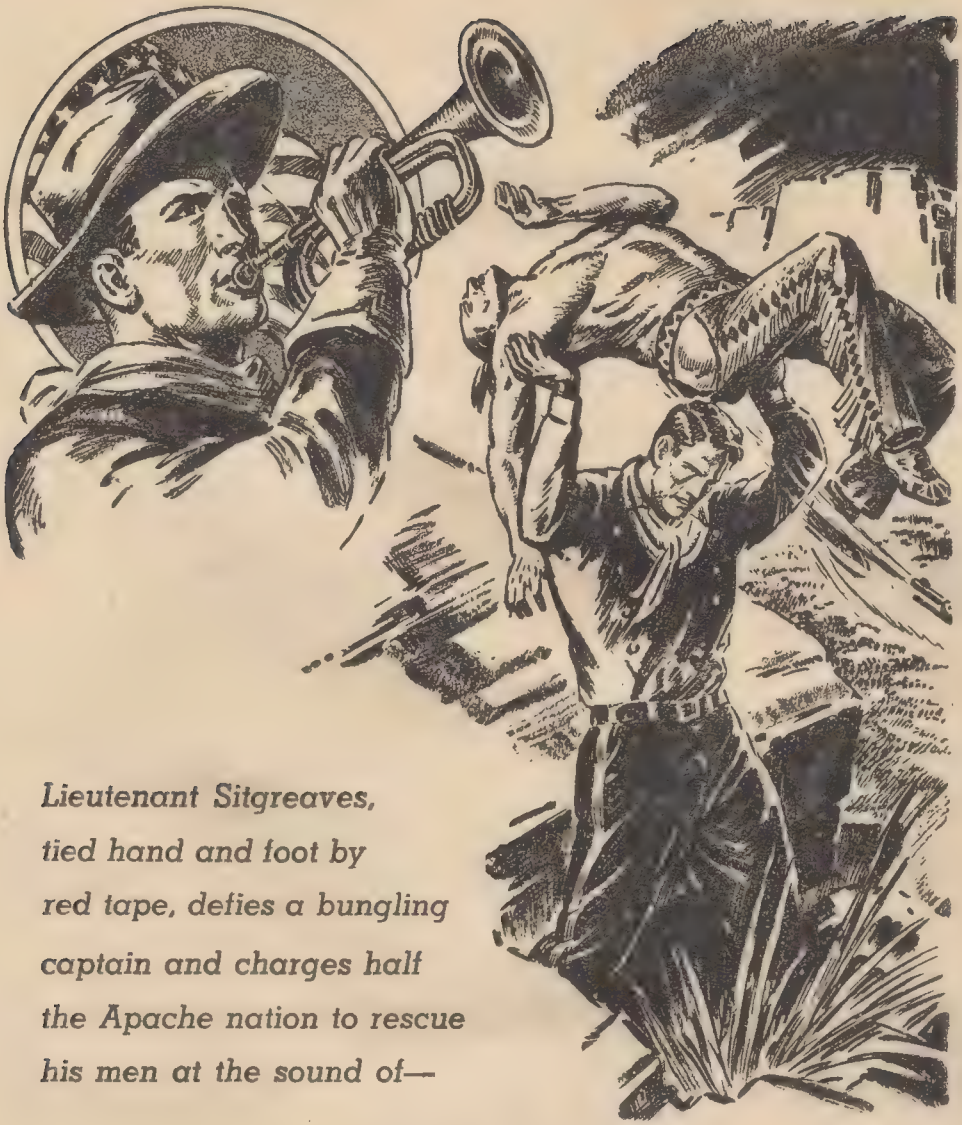
That was it. Carl fell to his knees. He struggled to hold himself there, a red haze dancing before his eyes, then collapsed.

The judge's voice came clearly to him. "He said we'd been in hell and I guess we have, and it's not to our credit that a kid drifter had to pull us out."

Laura was there, cradling his head in her lap, calling to the doctor. Mrs. Larsen stood in the door, screaming, "You called your town Hope, but you should have named it Gomorrah. Or Sodom. There's nothing but evil amongst you."

But she was wrong. Hope was the right name. You knock down the object that makes the shadow and the sun falls brightly upon you. No more aimless drifting, no more hunger. Soon your hands would learn to grip the plow handles. The stolen horses and cattle would be returned by a sheriff who could now do the job he was elected to do, because you made it possible for him to call himself a man.

Those were the thoughts in Carl Benton's mind as the red haze gave way to blackness, good blackness that blotted out the pain. • • •



Lieutenant Sitgreaves, tied hand and foot by red tape, defies a bungling captain and charges half the Apache nation to rescue his men at the sound of—

BUGLES IN

CHAPTER I

The Unseen Watcher

THE clump of Spanish bayonet stood alone on the bluff, a harsh-spined and spiked thing, as unfriendly and dangerous as the Southwest desert itself. Through its stiff, swordlike fronds appeared something even more hostile, a pair of black eyes, the agate-hard eyes of an Apache warrior, stripped to breech clout and moccasins, his black, oily

A Novelet by

MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

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THE MORNING

hair confined in a red flannel band around his forehead, his rifle beside him.

He had been there since daylight. It was now late afternoon. Despite the heat of the sun, boiling down upon him out of a burnished copper sky, and heedless of thirst and hunger, he had remained there, hidden, scarce showing the tremor of a muscle, his

beady eyes fixed upon that fort on the far bluff.

It was a nondescript affair, that fort, a shabby collection of barracks, stables and officers' quarters, built of warped and weathered cottonwood lumber, surrounded by a stockade of logs set upright in the ground. At each corner of the stockade was a sort of tower, a bastion, which housed the sentries. On duty day and night, they kept watch on the desert stretching in all directions, and on the road that came tortuously winding through the white *caliche* of the desert soil.

But the eyes of the sentries were not keen enough to spy out that immobile Apache warrior who lay hidden behind the Spanish bayonet, watching the fort with hate-filled eyes.

Along the road came a four-mule Army ambulance, an escort of eight troopers riding with it, their black campaign hats, shirts, blue breeches and black boots white with *caliche* dust, their yellow neckerchiefs tied high over their noses to keep the dust out of their nostrils.

Two soldiers sat on the ambulance driver's seat, one with carbine in hand, while inside were two passengers, a stout and elderly captain and his daughter, a fresh-cheeked girl of some eighteen years.

The Apache warrior on the bluff crouched even lower into the dust as the ambulance with its escort passed beneath him and crossed over, climbed the road to the opposite bluff and entered the gates of the fort.

The Apache's beady eyes, watching saw a file of soldiers lined up inside the gates. They held their carbines stiffly upright before them and stared straight to the front, while another white soldier, with golden-yellow shoulder straps on his blouse, raised his "long knife" up to his chin, in some sort of formal greeting. The Apache concluded that some one of the white chiefs had arrived.

SO ABSORBED did he become in this scene that for a little while he relaxed his vigilance and forgot to glance to the rear. In those few minutes he missed the sight of another small dust cloud coming along the road a mile or two behind. By the time he thought to glance back along the road, the small dust cloud had dissipated into thin air and there was nothing to show what had caused it.

Inside the fort, the elderly captain dismounted stiffly from the ambulance and returned the salute of the stout young officer wearing the bars of a first lieutenant. The lieutenant returned his sword to its scabbard and, leaving his guard still standing stiffly at attention, shook hands with the captain.

"I'm very glad to see you, Captain Newbold. I hope you had a good trip, sir," he burbled. His attitude toward his senior was somewhat fawning and artificial, thought the young girl watching from the ambulance.

"Terrible! terrible!" grunted the captain. "Never saw such heat and dust!"

But the lieutenant was not listening. He had spied the girl's eyes upon him and gallantly he lifted his hat and bowed. As he replaced his hat upon his head he saw a slight movement of one of the men standing stiffly to attention and he turned swiftly.

"Straighten out there!" he barked harshly. "Sergeant, see that the men stand at attention until they are dismissed."

He looked obliquely at the girl to see the effect of this display of authority, but she was gazing elsewhere.

"Dismiss the guard!" said the captain irritably and waited while the lieutenant gave his orders. Then the two walked across the small parade ground, while the ambulance took the girl to the quarters set aside for the commanding officer.

"Terrible place!" growled the captain. "Is it always as hot as this here?"

"I'm afraid so, sir—even worse. The men have a story, you know, relating that one of them died and went to hell after serving here a year and was back the next night for his blankets!"

"H'm!" grunted the captain, plainly not in the least amused. Noting this,

the stout lieutenant immediately wiped the ingratiating smile off his face and became very grave indeed, bending his head attentively to his senior's words.

"What's the strength here?" asked the captain.

"One company of cavalry, sir. B Company, fifty-eight effectives, four men in hospital and three in the guardhouse."

"Pack train?"

"Yes, sir. Eight packers and forty-eight mules."

"Where's the other officer?"

"Mister Sitgreaves, sir? He asked permission to make a patrol with one of the civilian scouts. He has an idea that the Apaches are due to come charging through here any day or night."

The stout lieutenant smiled tolerantly over so juvenile a notion.

"General Crook has the same idea," the captain said, "but I think he is overly-anxious. Since Victorio was killed I think that the Apaches have lost their taste for fighting. But the general talks about some new fellow —Ana, or Nante, or something like that."

"Nana? Yes, sir, that's the fellow that Mister Sitgreaves is always prating about."

"What sort of fellow is this Sitgreaves?" asked the captain. They had reached headquarters now, and Captain Newbold seated himself behind the commanding officer's desk and glanced at the official papers spread out there.

The lieutenant shrugged.

"All right, according to his lights, I guess. If I had any criticism to make I would say he was not soldierly enough, always hanging out with these civilian scouts and Apache scouts. And he's inclined to be a little too familiar with enlisted men. I've had to reprimand him several times. He was a plebe at the Point when I was a first classman. He was always a little B.J., you know: fresh, disrespectful and rather contemptuous of higher authority."

The captain grunted. He turned to his papers, while Lieutenant Morton sat on the edge of his chair, assiduously ready to give assistance.

BUT a commotion at the fort gate brought both officers to the open window. A small crowd of soldiers was milling about by the guardhouse. Towering above them was the tall, compactly-built figure of an officer on a rangy thoroughbred horse, with a civilian scout in fringed buckskin shirt, nondescript overalls and Indian moccasins, riding beside him. Before them on foot, his hands tied about him, and held by a rope in the hands of the civilian scout, was an Apache warrior. The trio headed for the commanding officer's office, and shortly entered the room.

The tall officer was bronzed by the Southwest sun until his face was nearly as dark as an Indian's. Something about his bearing and attitude suggested the lithe strength of a tempered steel blade. The captain stared at him and the officer drew himself up and saluted.

"Second Lieutenant Sitgreaves, sir, reporting to the new commanding officer!"

The scout, one Terry Miller, shifted his quid of tobacco, nodded a greeting, then motioned the wild-eyed Apache prisoner over to one side.

"Where did you pick this fellow up?" asked Captain Newbold.

"He was hiding out behind a clump of Spanish bayonet, right across from the fort, sir," reported Sitgreaves, and forebore looking at Morton, the senior lieutenant. "Evidently been hiding out there all day from the signs!" he added.

Morton flushed. "Impossible. I've had two patrols out today!" he said sharply.

Sitgreaves did not comment. The old scout blinked.

"All the same, this Injun's been out there all day, spyin' on the fort!" said the scout. "He belongs to Nana's gang."

"Yes," said Sitgreaves. "We ran across traces of Nana and his gang today. He's holed up somewhere down around Devil's Canyon along the riv-

er. I'd suggest, sir, that we move out and try to intercept him before he gets past us and loose in the Territory."

"When I want your suggestions, Mister Sitgreaves, I'll ask for them!" said Captain Newbold flatly. "How many men has he with him?"

Sitgreaves gazed at him steadily, without changing expression. "About two hundred and fifty to three hundred, I'd say."

"There's a lot of difference between two hundred and fifty and three hundred, Mister Sitgreaves!" said the captain sharply. "I insist that my officers be more exact in their reports!"

"Pretty hard to be exact about Injuns!" commented Old Terry. "They show up one minute and vamoose the next, and the Angel Gabriel hisself couldn't tell exactly how many there was at any given time!"

The captain looked annoyed, but pointedly disregarded the old scout.

"Are their women and children with them?" he asked Sitgreaves.

"No, sir, it's a war party."

"H'm, so much the worse. Well, we'd better move out against them tomorrow," the captain rumbled.

Sitgreaves shook his head. "They may be fifty miles away from here by tomorrow, Captain!" he said. "There's a chance that they may hole up to bake *mescal*, in which case they'd stay around a few days, but it's a slim chance."

The captain frowned. "We'll move out tomorrow. There's a detachment of infantry due in here then, guarding a wagon train of empties going back to the supply depot. I'd feel safer if they were here in the fort while we go out.

"Mister Morton, issue orders that the company be ready to march at daylight, three days ration and forage and extra ammunition. I'll take the company—you'll accompany me. Mister Sitgreaves will remain in command of the fort."

Sitgreaves said nothing, but old Terry looked up, startled.

"You're leaving behind one o' the best Injun trackers in the hull Territory!" objected the old man. "Loot'nent Sitgreaves speaks Apache like a native and knows this country like the back of his hand." Terry's voice faded off. The captain was glaring at him, his face red with anger.

"Guess I shoot off my face too much!" said Terry and rose, yanking the Apache prisoner along with him. "Do you want that I should put this Injun in the guardhouse?"

The captain nodded.

"Anything further, sir?" asked Sitgreaves. "I'd like to get cleaned up and get something to eat."

"Nothing," Newbold said, and Sitgreaves saluted and left.

Newbold stared after him and shook his head.

"Guess you're right, Morton, Sitgreaves will stand taking down a bit!"

Terry the scout was profane about the whole matter as he turned over his captive to the sergeant of the guard.

"Sendin' out that no-good Morton!" he swore. "Why, that Morton has had his boots nailed to the fort ever since he's been here. Never sticks his head outside the walls—sends Loot'nent Sitgreaves to do every tough job. Now he butters up to the new captain—probably tells Newbold that Sitgreaves is a no-good son-of-a-son and Sitgreaves gits left behind to look after the women and children! It's a hell of a Army, if you want my opinion!"

"It shore is!" agreed the sergeant.

CHAPTER II

Rivalry for a Girl

IF DOUGLAS Sitgreaves felt perturbed, he didn't show it.

His striker had hot water ready for him and sloshed him with buckets of it in the small shed behind his one-room shack. He shaved before a cracked mirror placed on a dressing table evolved from a discarded packing box, the rest of the furniture consisting of a narrow iron cot, a canvas

chair and a smaller packing box upon which was spread his supper.

With a change of linen and the donning of his dress uniform, with its golden-yellow shoulder-straps and the broad yellow stripe down the trouser leg, he threw off the fatigue of the last gruelling twenty-four hours and repaired to make his obligatory call on the new commanding officer, Captain Newbold.

Marjorie Newbold met him at the door and gave him both her hands, her face alight.

"My, my!" he exclaimed, "talk about roses blooming in the desert, and the shadow of a rock in a thirsty land—what a sight for lonely eyes you are, Marjorie!"

"Oh, Doug! you're hopeless!" she laughed and led him into the sparsely furnished living room which she had managed to brighten up with some gay Navajo blankets on chairs and couch, curtains at the windows and some books and pictures. "Father has gone over to headquarters with Mister Morton."

"All right, all right, but you keep yourself away from me, Marjorie!" Sitgreaves ordered with mock sternness. "I didn't come galloping over here just to pass the time of day with a good-looking girl. I came to make my duty call upon your daddy, as regulations require. Keep away from me, woman, before I forget all regulations!"

"Don't let me stand in your way!" she retorted. "Only tell me what you've been doing with yourself since that last dance we had together at Tucson."

Doug Sitgreaves gazed at her with an air of great devotion.

"Marjorie, I swear by the stars above! I've done nothing since that hour but walk around in a daze whispering your name to myself!" He made an extravagant bow.

And so it was that Captain Newbold and Morton, entering found them, the girl flushed and lovely and laughing, and Doug Sitgreaves suddenly turned grave as he faced the stout old captain. Marjorie murmured an excuse and left the room.

"Well, well, Mister Sitgreaves, I'm glad to see you, I'm sure," said the captain, not looking glad in the least. "Morton here informs me that you've been doing a lot of hanging out with the civilian scouts and Apache scouts.

"Always remember that your military responsibilities come first and that an officer's dignity is very important. He must pick his associates carefully. The same applies to his relations with enlisted men—which should not be marked with the slightest trace of familiarity."

"Yes, sir," agreed Doug Sitgreaves quietly, and then his eyes strayed to Morton, who had the grace to look slightly uncomfortable at this quick and none too tactful disclosure of his report to the new commanding officer. "Yes, sir," repeated Sitgreaves, "it's very kind of Mister Morton and you to take so much trouble with my training as an officer. I shall certainly endeavor to profit by it!"

Doug's tone and bearing were correctness itself but both Morton and Newbold stared at him uncertainly. The captain cleared his throat portentously and changed the subject, discussing the expedition starting in the morning.

Marjorie came in and signalled Doug, beckoning him out to the kitchen. Lieutenant Morton's eyes followed them as they disappeared, while he strove to listen with proper respect to

Captain Newbold's words. But he grew more absent-minded as he heard Marjorie's delighted laughter.

In the kitchen, the girl had brought forth some precious lemons she had carried with her, and they were making lemonade, Doug drawing out this interval as long as possible.

When they returned to the living room at last, with the glasses brimming, Captain Newbold took his glass without a "thank you," but Lieutenant Morton rose with a strained smile and strove to be courtly about it.

Sitgreaves disposed himself easily on a chair next to Marjorie and gave attention to the captain's plans for the morrow. As he listened, his face grew grave and the laughter left him. For Newbold was bent on committing the unforgivable and dangerous military error of dividing his forces in the face of a stronger enemy!

"—and I'll take my half company," the captain was saying, "and search the canyons to the west. We'll join forces on the river bank, about noon."

NOW Sitgreaves knew that Morton had little knowledge of the canyons and plateaus in that area and naturally the captain knew even less. It was a dangerous and foolish move, with every chance in favor of the wily Apaches, some of the cleverest and most agile guerilla fighters in the world.

For him, as a junior officer to speak out of turn would, he knew, bring down reprimand. But he thought doggedly of the good soldiers whose lives were being so foolishly risked, and braced himself to take the objection. Morton was "yessing" the captain's cockeyed plan assiduously, with a flattering air of wonder at hearing such pearls of wisdom dropping from Newbold's lips.

"I think it's a splendid plan, Captain." Morton was unctuous in his approval. Sitgreaves could take no more.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he protested, "but that canyon area is pretty much broken up and confusing—and Nana has the reputation of being one of the cleverest fighters on the American continent. I'm afraid, sir, that his scouts will quickly learn of the divided company and that Nana will throw everything he has at one element of it and then mop up the other at his leisure. I would suggest keeping the company together and sending out scouts to locate Nana's outfit."

Upon Morton's face came a look of gentle resignation. He glanced at Captain Newbold and shrugged, as much as to say, "I told you so!"

Newbold's face became as red as a turkey's comb. He spluttered and cleared his throat.

"As I've already had occasion to tell you once before today, Sitgreaves, when I want your suggestions I'll ask for them!" He turned again to Morton. "Now, as I was saying—" He continued his harangue, his voice sharp and annoyed, and a constraint fell upon the room.

After a few minutes Sitgreaves rose to go. Marjorie looked desolate for a second but rose to see him to the door.

"Good night, young man. Your job will be to look after the fort. You stick to your job and I'll stick to mine!" Newbold said, panting.

"Very well, sir." Doug Sitgreaves nodded to Morton and followed Marjorie to the door.

"Don't mind Daddy," she whispered. "He's tired after the long trip and he's disappointed at having been sent away off here from headquarters where he had been on duty so long!"

"Keep your little head from worrying," said Doug. "I always talk out of turn—when I think I should!"

That was the trouble, he reflected as he made his way to his one-room shack. The old man had been too long at headquarters and didn't know much about fighting Apaches in the field. Sitgreaves was worried for he was certain that the company was going to be led into a massacre by such tactics against one of the wildest, most savage fighters in the world.

He changed into field uniform and inspected the sentries, thereafter seeking out Terry Miller, the old civilian scout. The two sat squatted on their

heels, talking, low-voiced, for an hour. Then they looked up at Nantaje, the Apache scout, and the three went into a session lasting for another hour.

"Ef only the captain would pull outa here 'fore daylight, he'd stand a little better chance of getting there before word of his comin'!" said Terry.

"No, he's set on moving out after daylight. But maybe we can do something about word getting there before his coming!" suggested Doug Sitgreaves.

He went to his quarters, changed boots for Indian moccasins and strapped a keen-bladed hunting knife to his belt. Then he joined the other two at the gate and like wraiths they slid out, one by one. Doug Sitgreaves headed across the draw to the bluff where they'd surprised and captured the Apache scout that day, while the other two circled around the fort in opposite directions.

There was no moon that night but a faint sort of luminosity overspread the desert face and the stars shone hard and clear in that high, dry air.

Sitgreaves made his way cautiously and slowly up a dry arroyo leading to the bluff top. He seemed almost to flow over the ground instead of creeping; his feet, in the flexible moccasins, feeling out and avoiding each loose pebble and dry branch before weight was put upon them.

The avoidance of the many spiked and sharp-thorned plants was in itself a matter of considerable difficulty. There were clumps of cat-claw and low lying bunches of mescal and jagged Spanish bayonet, worse than any barbwire entanglement, and tall *pita haya* columns and straight cactus shafts the size and shape of a man, requiring intent study before making a move in their direction.

BUT the jagged and spiked inanimate things were only a background to the poison-barbed and fanged life that crawled and crept in and out of the rocks. Twice Doug Sitgreaves, flat on the ground, heard the slithering sound of a rattlesnake moving through the rocks nearby. Nearing the top of the bluff a big shape moved sullenly out of the way—a Gila monster, no less, making its nightly meal of spiders and scorpions and centipedes, all of which were hazards along the route, with the most deadly, implacable and poisonous reptile of all, the Apache, in hiding somewhere at the end of it.

As he had learned by experience, long staring at night on the mesa tends to distort the vision. Every few minutes he closed his eyes and rested them so that they would not be magnifying clumps of cacti and Spanish bayonet into creeping Apaches. For the devilish thing about the Apache was the extreme likelihood that the hunter might suddenly turn into the hunted. So sharp were the Indian perceptions and so wary their vigilance that the slightest carelessness invited swift and silent death.

With Doug's arrival at the top of the bluff, his position was thrice dangerous, for the slightest movement or disclosure of his person would loom up against the starlight with all the clarity of full daylight to the keen Apache eye. It took him, the officer, a full quarter of an hour of patient flowing along the ground, taking advantage of every fold in the earth and every clump of bush and brush, before he got off that dangerous skyline and turned about cautiously to study it himself.

Moistening his finger, he lifted it to the slight wind and found it coming from the direction of the bluff and from that Spanish bayonet clump that provided such excellent cover for anyone watching the fort.

He was thankful that he and Terry Miller had so carefully effaced every trace of their quick capture of the scout that day, smoothing out the ground with a branch of mesquite and carefully wiping out every footprint they had made in going and coming.

After another five minutes of slow progress, he was at last within sight of that clump of Spanish bayonet that was his goal. Staring at it long and intently, he could see nothing in the

blackness that enveloped its base. Then he sniffed the slight breeze blowing toward him from over that clump and froze, suddenly and completely.

For the breeze brought to him the odor of Apache, that faint commingling of rancid oil, wood smoke, *mescal* and Indian tanned leather that was the body odor of those human wolves of the Southwest.

CHAPTER III

Peril in the Night

NOW came the most dangerous part of his task. Apaches, like most Indians, had no particular liking for the night, it being their firm conviction that a warrior slaughtered after dark was doomed to wander through a somber and unlighted hereafter. The likelihood was, Doug reasoned, that there were two silent forms ahead of him in the darkness somewhere, at least one of them under the Spanish bayonet clump. To tackle one of them without locating the other, would mean the knife of the unseen one in his back before he could turn.

He felt about him until his hand came across a long dry branch. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he brought out, moving so slowly that the operation took at least five minutes, the small canvas sewing kit issued by the Army to its soldiers. From it he drew the hank of stout, black linen thread which it contained. More minutes passed, while he tied the end of this to a branch near at hand.

Not until this was done did he move carefully farther along, unravelling the thread as he went. Slowly he circled the Spanish bayonet clump, until he had put at least fifteen feet between himself and the branch to which was tied the other end of his thread.

All was heavy and oppressive silence about him. He peered and listened but could hear nothing nor see any sign of life. He gave the thread a small twitch. The dry branch some fifteen feet away made an almost infinitesimal scraping sound against the dry *caliche* soil.

No other sound broke the silence. Sitgreaves froze, immobile, and waited, every sense alert and straining. Minute after minute passed in silence until he began to think that his ruse had failed. But patience is one of the most valuable requisites of a scout. He waited another five minutes and had about given up hope when he stiffened slightly.

There had come the slight *"tink!"* of a pebble, some four or five yards below the branch on the far side. Doug figured swiftly. That sound was just a trifle too loud. It was the sound made by a pebble falling from a height, not one disturbed on the ground. The Apache had tossed it there from above. It was an old trick and he was not taken in. Instead, he gave the thread in his hand another quick jerk, heavier this time, the resultant scrape of the branch sounding like the instant reaction of a man disturbed by a sound at his rear.

Then, instead of watching the spot from which had come the sound of the pebble, Sitgreaves continued to stare at the darkness under the Spanish bayonet. It stirred. Not only did it stir but some four feet to its left the shadows under a clump of mesquite also came to life.

The first shadow flowed obliquely across his front, moving toward that dry branch. The second shadow oozed down and followed, coming within four or five feet of Doug's hiding place.

The shadow that was Sitgreaves gathered itself, knife in hand. The smell of Apache was strong in his nostrils as the second Indian crept nearer, moving now across Doug's front, intent on that shadowy hollow where the branch had scraped against the *caliche* soil.

Taking a deep breath, the soldier rose to a crouch behind his screen of cactus, then swiftly stepped around it and leaped on the shadowy form from

the left rear. Before the Apache had time to turn, the knife flashed swiftly down.

Such things often seem dreamlike in retrospect. Sitgreaves felt them dreamlike in action. It was as though he stood detached and watched the knife strike deep into the one place that meant instant death. The Apache flung up his arms and his knees buckled. There was a rush from the darkness. Doug lifted up the limp body, the smell of Apache strong in his nostrils, and flung it at a dark something that fired a rifle from the hip at him. The bullet thudded into the hurtling body of the dead Apache.

The momentum and weight of that hurled body bore the second Apache backwards and he stumbled, dropping

his rifle. Sitgreaves reached down, caught it by the muzzle and swung the butt crashing against the side of the Indian's head.

Nor did he waste a second watching the man fall. He leaped to one side, smashing the rifle butt against flesh and bone and hearing the tinkle of a knife falling as he beat down a third Apache who had sprung up from somewhere.

A shout came from across the gully, from the bastion of the fort, and the sound of running feet on the road below. A few seconds and Terry Miller and Nantaje were with him—Nantaje finishing off the two wounded Apaches and quietly scalping the three of them.

"Purty good, Loot-nent!" Terry cut off a piece of plug tobacco. "I was wonderin' why you selected this spot for yourself! Looks like you cleaned 'em all out—wasn't nary trace of any of 'em there on the other sides of the fort!"

SO IT was they came back through the gates of the fort, Nantaje insisting upon Sitgreaves carrying the three scalps, for the honor, while he and Terry Miller brought in the knives and rifles of the three dead Apaches. They were a small triumphant procession and the men at the guard house and the soldiers in barracks swarmed out, loud in admiration of the coup.

"He's a good la-ad, thot Liftinent Sitgreaves!" said one Irish voice.

"Shure and they don't come inny betther! Leave the la-ad alone 'nd he'll clane up all the Injuns in the Territory single-handed!" asserted a second.

But there was no praise from Captain Newbold or from Lieutenant Morton.

The two of them, called out by the sound of the rifle fired on the bluff and the excitement about the gates, had left the colonel's living room and were at the gate.

Morton looked distastefully at Sitgreaves, dust-streaked, with blood dripping from the three fresh scalps, and a tangle of branches and twigs and cactus spikes covering his uniform, and even more distastefully at the soldiers crowding about him.

"Hereafter, Mister Sitgreaves," said Captain Newbold heavily, "you will please request permission before going out on any glory-hunting scouting expeditions. The men need their sleep and I don't want the fort disturbed at all hours of the night!"

"Very well, sir!" replied Sitgreaves quietly.

He threw the scalps on the guardhouse porch and shook some of the dust and debris off his uniform.

But old Terry was mad as a wet hen.

"Looka here, Captain, that wasn't no glory-huntin' expedition as you call it. If it hadn't been for the loot'nent snagging them three Injuns they'd have spread word the second the company marched outa here in the morning, and old Nana woulda been sitting all ready for you to walk into a nice ambush before ever you got on his trail!"

And before the outraged captain could find words, old Terry marched

angrily away into the darkness, growling to himself.

"You men get back to barracks!" bellowed the captain, having to take out his wrath on someone. "Here it is after taps and every son-of-a-son hanging around losing his sleep. It's a disgraceful state of discipline and I'll not have it!" The men faded away silently to their barracks and the place resumed its normal air of calm once more.

The notes of reveille sounded all too soon at that, and found the place astir with movement. The cooks had already been roused up by the sergeant of the guard and the place was redolent of coffee and bacon. Horses were watered and fed, and the saddles, already packed the night before, were heaved up and into place.

But there was little of the gaiety of word and action that marked the usual start into the field after Indians. The men were depressed by the word that had leaked down to them, of the leaving behind of Lieutenant Sitgreaves and the prospect of marching out behind Captain Newbold and Lieutenant Morton.

"Shure, and the la-ad Sitgreaves knows more of Injun fighting in his little finger than thim two put together in their hull bodies!" Mulcahey, the big saddler, announced, his voice thick with brogue.

" 'Tis Gawd's own thruth!" agreed Moriarty, he that had been a sergeant but reduced last pay day for overindulgence that had led him unwisely to insist that he could clean up the whole Army, single-handed.

"He's a stiddy lad in a fight, is young Sitgreaves, wid a joke always upon his lips and a friendly light in his eye, while this stuck-up jackanapes of a Morton is so plumb full of his own importánce he looks like naught but a hamstrung undertaker's assistant!"

"Thot'll do, 'tis no way to be talkin' of an officer, Mulcahey!" came sharp reproof from Sergeant Murphy. The men finished their saddling-up in silence. They fell into line dismounted and leading their horses, until the whole company was under arms and ready.

Followed then the brisk rollcall, the rise and fall of counting fours, running along the line like the barking of dogs, "One! TWO! *Three!* FOUR!" the opening out of the line at "Prepare to Mount!" and the quick swing into saddles at "Mount!"

"You will be in command of the fort now, Mister Sitgreaves!" said Captain Newbold as he went toward his waiting horse. "Be sure that you remain here. You are not to leave the fort *under any circumstances* until relieved! I want no more of this glory-chasing scouting of yours, no matter how important you, personally, esteem it to be!"

Marjorie came then, grave-eyed, as Army women are when their men start for the field, and kissed her father goodby. Morton galloped up, his saddle bags improperly strapped down and flapping, and drew up his horse with a flourish. But Marjorie, as though she hadn't seen him, turned away and spoke to Doug Sitgreaves.

"Good-by, Miss Marjorie!" called Morton, his voice edged. "And good-by, Sitgreaves. Take good care of the women and children!"

Doug Sitgreaves only grinned a slow grin but Marjorie flushed.

"The women and children will take good care of him also, Mr. Morton!" she said sweetly. "I'm making a start by inviting him to breakfast!"

THE company was quickly inspected and filed out the fort gate, followed by a section of pack mules and packers, with the guard standing at attention, and the wives and children of the soldiers waving good-by.

To Doug Sitgreaves' surprise, he found Terry Miller, the old scout, standing by the guardhouse. Terry shrugged his shoulders.

"The captain told me to stay back at the fort. I dunno—guess he don't cotton to me too much. He took Nantaje. Nantaje don't know enough English to give him any back talk!"

Like a good commander Doug Sitgreaves took immediate stock of his

forces. Between guards, men in hospital and the guardhouse, civilian Q.M. employes, a couple of Signal Corps men, and hospital orderlies, he had some twenty men all told, fit for service. It was enough to hold the fort until help came, in the unlikely event that the Apaches attacked.

This done, he wended his way toward the breakfast promised him by Marjorie. She was in gingham apron, flushed and attractive, bringing hot biscuits from the kitchen. There was a white tablecloth spread, a rarity in that country, and sausage and bacon, honey and preserves to go with the biscuits and coffee, all duly noted by Sitgreaves who also noted an air of reserve about Marjorie.

He said nothing about this until he'd finished his second cup of coffee, then stretched out his legs and smiled at her.

"How come you've gotten so all fired friendly all of a sudden, Marjorie?" he asked. She raised her eyebrows.

"Have I?" she asked.

"Sure, I've never been accustomed to being rushed off my feet this way by a beautiful woman just bustin' herself to be friendly and gracious! It's embarrassing to a young fellow who hasn't been around very much. Don't you get carried away by my godlike beauty for I warn you fairly that I'm a cold-hearted villain!"

"Yes?" sniffed Marjorie in no very friendly fashion.

"Yes," returned Doug mildly, then uncoiled his long length, sought his hat, and prepared to take his departure. She looked up in surprise.

"Yes, I figure I'd better be moseying along before you get carried away and lose your young head!" And with that he started out the door.

"Oh, Doug, if you'd only be serious once in a while! That's the whole trouble," she said impulsively. "Not with me!" she added hastily. "I love your nonsense but it makes such a bad impression on Mr. Morton and my father and I'm afraid it's going to hurt your advancement. Mr. Morton says the soldiers don't respect you because you make a joke of everything."

Doug grew very still. "Morton said that to you?" he asked steadily.

"Yes, and Mr. Morton is very worried about it. He's really very fond of you and he hates to see you make an unfavorable impression." She was a little breathless and a little frightened at some change she saw come over him. But his voice was matter of fact enough as he replied.

"Well, it's kind of Mr. Morton to take such an interest in me. I suppose I'll have to become more serious and win back some of this respect I seem to be losing."

A hearty voice called in from the kitchen.

"You all ready, Miss Marjorie, foh me to do the dishes?" Caroline, the buxom and motherly wife of one of the Negro Q.M. employees, came in and started clearing away, smiling a greeting at Doug the while.

"How come, Caroline! I thought you'd ditched old Bill for a handsome big sergeant outa the Ninth Cavalry?" Sitgreaves twitted her gravely.

" 'Tain't so, Lootenent. Ah'm stickin' to old Bill closer'n the bark on a tree. 'Tain't nothin' but foolish talk goin' around 'bout that sahgent!" she bridled, pleased, and went out bearing the dishes with her.

"She likes you." Marjorie smiled broadly.

"And I like her," Doug said. "And there you have it. I like so doggone many people I haven't time to figure out whether they're going to respect me or not. I'll just have to get along being disrespected, I guess. Meantime, I've got about ten minutes more with you—getting powerful sleepy, as a matter of fact!"

"Yes, Mr. Morton says you spend a lot of time sleeping. Of course I wouldn't want to be the cause of your losing your beauty sleep. You run along any time you feel tired."

"Mighty nice of you." Doug picked up his hat again. "Certainly I can't go on risking my beauty for lack of sleep. Thanks for the lovely breakfast!" He was urbanity itself as he departed.

CHAPTER IV

Trouble on the Way

CAROLINE came bustling in, muttering to herself in such noticeable fashion that Marjorie was impelled to ask what was the matter..

"It's that lootenent. Ah couldn't help overheahin' you scoldin' him foh bein' sleepy. Foh lawd, Miss Marjorie, you all hadn't ought to do that wid a man what's been up all night and killed three Injuns wid his own bare hands—and that no good Lootenent Morton tellin' you all that nonsense about Lootenent Sitgreaves.

"Ah'm tellin' you, honey, that man Morton ain't fitten to tie Lootenent Sitgreaves shoes. Disrespect! Why, theah ain't a soldiah on this foht that wouldn't follow Lootenent Sitgreaves barefoot ovah the desert rocks, ef he asked 'em. And that's a powerful sight more'n they'd evah do for that no account Lootenent Morton."

"What's this about his being out last night and killing three Apaches?" the girl asked, her eyes wide.

"Jes whut Ah tole you, chile. Ef you don't believe me, go take a look down to the guardhouse at the scalps on the porch and you'll see 'em hangin' there wheah that Injun Nantaje put 'em!"

"I didn't know that. Mr. Morton told me that Mr. Sitgreaves was running around all last night making a rumpus and keeping everybody awake. He didn't say anything about the three Apaches!"

"Foh lawd, chile, you bettah not pay any heed to thet Lootenent Morton nohow!" advised Caroline, belligerent and scornful. "Ah'll tell you somethin'! Everybody in this fort would feel a lot easier in their minds ef Lootenent Sitgreaves was out there wid your pa ruther'n that no account Lootenent Morton!"

And with this parting shot Caroline returned to her duties, leaving a very thoughtful Marjorie behind her.

As for Doug Sitgreaves, he went on down to the guardhouse, inspected the sentries on post, then made a tour of the small hospital and lastly dropped into headquarters, finding that he was weighted down with a black mood of depression. Being a level headed sort of person, he sat down to analyze it and strive if possible to determine the cause.

It was not, he figured, either the hostility of Morton or the Morton-induced hostility of Captain Newbold, or Marjorie's seeming acceptance of their opinion of him. He was, he reasoned, a conscientious and hard-working officer, who put into his profession far more than Army Regulations required.

In addition, he was a better than average Indian fighter, having worked hard and strenuously to perfect his technique in the art of savage fighting—and he had managed to gain and hold the respect of most officers and all the soldiers and civilian scouts. He dismissed, then, his own possible shortcomings and faults as a cause for the black disquiet that overwhelmed him, reasoning that it must come from something outside of himself and his own affairs.

Then it came to him—he was worried into a blue funk over the danger to that small company of men, being led into possible massacre by two inept officers, through a country neither one of them knew and against an enemy whom they underestimated. This was the crux of the matter. Once he had it analyzed he became practical.

The question was, what could he do to prevent their encountering the misfortune he was certain that they faced? He had a small force of twenty men, at least half of whom would have to be left behind if he ventured forth in any attempt to save the company from massacre at the hands of Nana and his Apaches.

Moreover, he was strictly forbidden by Captain Newbold, to leave the fort under any circumstances, unless "relieved by lawful authority." But what was lawful authority? The regulations

governing Post and Fort commanders were very explicit. The senior officer on duty at a fort or post was, *ipso facto*, its commanding officer—and empowered to issue his own orders as necessity dictated.

Captain Newbold, absent from the

fort, was no longer commanding officer—that much was clear. So the devil with worrying about that!

But the question of force sufficient to achieve any aid to the company was another thing again, and he drummed with fingers on the desktop, striving to work out something that would turn the trick.

He was morally certain that, between them, Captain Newbold and Lieutenant Morton would foul up the works. They would probably haze the Apache Indian scout Nantaje to the point where that grouchy old warrior would shut up like a clam and be of absolutely no use.

HE TOYED with the idea of some sort of a decoy plan, whereby he could lead Nana and his Apaches away from the company and its inept leaders. His thoughts were interrupted by the orderly.

"Sor, Liftinent! Number Wan Post of the gyard reports some kind of a ruction comin' along the road, raisin' all kinds o' dust and about thray moiles away!" It was Terrence Muldoon, the commanding officer's orderly, speaking in all the glory of white gloves, spotless uniform and equipment. Sitgreaves uncoiled his length from behind the desk and strode swiftly down to the corner bastion, climbed the ladder and was up with the sentry in surprisingly short time.

"Low, heavy, clouds of dust, infantry," "high thin clouds of dust, cavalry," "broken clouds of dust, artillery or wagon trains." He remembered the old formula from "Upton's Tactics." There were broken clouds, but certainly there was no artillery in that neck of the woods. So it must be wagon trains. Suddenly he remembered the captain's remark concerning the train of empty wagons, with its infantry escort, due to arrive that morning.

His plan came to him then in a flash.

He was down at the gate when the train rolled in, four-line mule teams, dust-laden with white *caliche*, canvas-covered wagons filled with infantry soldiers. A squad of seven men and a corporal to each wagon, nine wagons filled with soldiers and a spare wagon carrying their extra equipment. A young "shavetail" fresh out of the Point was in command. Doug dimly remembered him as a plebe, his name was Halford, or Hartford, or something like that.

His name was actually Harper, which was pretty close.

"Listen mister," he told him, "you've got exactly thirty minutes to water your stock, feed your men, get hitched up and your men back in those wagons. Hop to it as quickly as the Lord will let you!" Harper was a good plebe, as Doug remembered. He wasted no time in questions but put his lead mules at a gallop and had them lined up in the Q.M. corral in short order, with his cooks and helpers on the run toward the company kitchen and the teamsters rushing their charges to the water troughs.

"Good lad!" said Sitgreaves as Harper, with men and animals being fed, joined him.

"We'll see if I can get you a mouthful to eat!" he said and walked Harper rapidly to Captain Newbold's quarters. Marjorie was an Army girl—she needed no explanations, but flew to the kitchen with Caroline.

Sitgreaves had lined up every sound horse on the picket line and had gone into the mess room, interrupting the meal long enough to call on every man who'd had cavalry service. He

knew there would be plenty, the way Regular Army soldiers switched around from branch to branch on every reenlistment.

There were fifteen, all told. These he called upon to report to the sergeant in charge of cavalry quarters after they'd finished eating, and then selected another ten men from his own group, replacing them with ten infantrymen.

Harper came back from Marjorie's meal, looking pleased and well fed, and had a little of what had transpired and what was to transpire explained to him. This was interrupted by a call from Number One of the guard.

"Two mounted men galloping toward the fort, comin' like all hell was after thim!" came the cry.

Doug paled. This was bad, if it meant what he thought it meant!

It did.

As they came in, Sitgreaves saw one of them reeling in the saddle, his left arm swinging loose. The other was Mulcahey, the big saddler.

"Liftinent, there's all hell poppin'! We wint wid Captain Newbold and was jumped by the Injuns. The Captain's horse broke its laig in a badger hole and threw the captain and the Injuns grabbed him."

"Morton?" Sitgreaves snapped.

"Naw! Liftinent Morton took the other half o' the company and went vamoosin' off into a canyon and we've seen nayther hide nor hair of him nor his min.

"Our min ducked into anither canyon beyont the Injun camp and are foightin' for their loives! Me own horse got an arrow in his laig and wint woild and runaway wid me and I piked up Timmins here and helped him on his horse and we came on in!"

"Get a fresh horse, Mulcahey, and lead us to the place!" Sitgreaves ordered.

The word spread swiftly. Silent and determined men were saddled up, mules were hitched, the infantrymen piled back into their wagons and the column set forth from the gate of the fort within the quarter hour. Looking back, Doug saw Marjorie's pale face and tragic eyes staring after him and waved at her.

THEN they had climbed the bluff on the far side and stretched out on the winding road, the wagons rattling along in a swaying column, the mounted men moving alongside, Sitgreaves and the young infantry officer, Harper, along with Terry Miller, the scout, riding at the head. Mulcahey rode up on a fresh horse and from him Doug got more details and the approximate position of the canyon where Captain Newbold's half troop was fighting.

"Did they kill the captain?" asked Sitgreaves.

"Oi don' belave so, sor, at least not to wanst, for the last thing Oi saw they was bundlin' him up on a horse and tying his legs beneath it!"

"Saving him for the torture!" said Doug. "But that wouldn't take place ordinarily until tonight. There's still hope of rescuing him. Tell me about this canyon and the Apache camp."

And with voice raised above the rattling of the wagons bounding along behind them, Mulcahey gave all the information he had.

"I think I know that canyon, Terry," said Doug.

"I kinda thought you would. Remember that canyon behind it running in quartering?"

"I should say I do. That's where I took First Sergeant Moriarty on an exploring trip."

"*If* he remembers that canyon, there may still be a chance to save part of the company!" said Terry. "But I wonder whut came of Lootenent Morton?"

The question was soon answered. The road dipped to swing down toward the river and the three troopers out in front waved back, signalling "Small party!" The "small party" came into view within the next five minutes.

It was a sweaty and disheveled Lieutenant Morton with five men of his half company. He drew up his horse as Sitgreaves motioned the column to go on.

"Go on back to the fort, Sitgreaves. They're all lost, the captain and all the company!" Morton was pale.

"Did you see them killed?" asked Doug steadily.

"No, but they couldn't possibly have escaped! We were jumped by hundreds of Apaches. We rode out."

"What became of your men?"

"I don't know!" Morton's voice rose almost hysterically. "I tell you we were surrounded and cut our way out—those who couldn't make it stayed behind!" Without further word, Morton brushed by, heading for the fort. Four of the five men with him quietly dropped back and joined Doug's column, among them Sergeant Murphy. "What's the story, Sergeant?" asked Doug as they rejoined the column and galloped to its head.

"Leftenant, it's not for me to say, nor do I know the whole tale of what happened this day. But 'tis loikely that the captain didn't know how to handle the Injun scout we had wid us, Nantaje, for Nantaje shut up like a clam and rode behind the column, sayin' naught to annywan, wid the consequence that we rode into a trap—this was afther we'd lift the captain wid half the company goin' up a wide canyon on our right.

"Annyways we wint along ontil we heard rifle foire behind us and the leftenant stopped and listened but be thot toime there was a gang o' Injuns rode down on us fair splittin' us in two wid most of the min ridin' up another canyon and we few left wid the leftenant, who set out for the fort wid us afther him. 'Tis all Oi know, sor, and whut has happened to the ithers Oi would loike to know f'r Oi have good comrades amongst thim!"

"Do you think there's a chance that any of them are left alive?"

"The leftenant's guess is as good as moine, sor. Oi'm prayin' to the Virgin Mary and all the Saints that thim tough blayguards in our company will hold out until we git there!"

"Keep on praying, Sergeant, we may make it at that!"

One of the troopers on the point rode back. "We can hear the sound of firing, Loot'nent!" he reported, and Doug promptly galloped ahead, out of the noise made by the column of wagons, until he also heard it. Not over two thousand yards ahead, he figured, coming out of the opening of a canyon that led down toward the river.

He speeded up the column to a gallop, covering that two thousand yards at speed, until he came to the slight rise that led up and over and down into the canyon floor, where he halted the column and rode forward under the crest accompanied by Terry, the scout.

The sound of firing was now much louder and his heart rose at it—certainly some of the men were still holding out. Dismounting, he and Terry crawled up and peered over the crest.

TOUGH TEXANS

TEXAS was crammed full of salty individuals who were so touchy about their independence that they would spit in the devil's eye, and so tough they would give a rattlesnake first bite in a contest.

One such old frontiersman was Brit Bailey, who left his name to a stretch of country called Bailey's Prairie. This was on land supposed to have been colonized by the great Stephen F. Austin, yet legend has it that when Austin arrived and ordered Bailey off, the old man not only stood his ground, but made Austin back down.

No one knows where Bailey is buried, but the story is part of Texas Folklore that when he came to die, he gave orders that he be buried standing up.

"I never looked up to any man," he said, "and even after I'm dead I ain't goin' to have folks saying, 'here lies Brit Bailey.'"

CHAPTER V

Field of Battle

BELOW them, sloping down for nearly a thousand yards, stretched a broad canyon, grass covered. Half way down its length was an Apache encampment, consisting of fifty or sixty brush *jacals* and a few tepees, with small cook fires burning and the unmistakable scent of baking *mescal* heavy on the air.

Beyond the camp, another five hundred yards or so, there were Apache ponies tethered, and beyond them were Apaches firing into the narrow mouth of a smaller canyon that led into the cliffs. From this came the occasional bark of a carbine—slowly and carefully, whereby Doug figured that either there were few men left or that the remnants of the company were husbanding their ammunition. He hoped it was the latter.

Sitgreaves went down to his horse and mounted. Followed by Terry, he rode back to the head of the column and issued his orders.

There were two buglers with the infantry company and a cavalry trumpeter among his own men.

"The captain is probably lying out, bound, among those tents!" said Doug and designated mounted men to seek for him. Everything was set. The column moved out at a walk, soon increased to a trot. Then, as they hit the crest of the hill, the gallop started, Sitgreaves holding down the lead units until all were over the hill.

Then the troopers galloped up, "Right Front into Line!" and the entire mass of wagons, mules, and mounted men swept down that valley like a wave. Such a thing had probably never before been seen by the Indians. The few in the Apache camp stared, open-mouthed, at the swift and terrible advance.

Nor had they time to run to cover before mounted men were amongst them, cutting them down, while others sought for the captain. Looking back, Doug saw two of his men coming out of one of the tepees, supporting the captain between them. His heart lifted and he turned to the task in front.

"Now!" he signalled the buglers, and the blare of brass broke forth in brazen and exultant clamor, playing the swift challenging notes of "Rally!" for signal to those men in the canyon.

The Apaches firing into the canyon, apprised for the first time of the wave that was thundering down upon them, began to run to their ponies. But before ever they reached them, the wagons swept up into a line, swung to the left, and the infantrymen in them smashed out a roaring volley, which swept among the massed Apaches like a scythe.

The mounted men on the flanks galloped forward like a steel-tipped wave, their high-pitched cavalry yell sounding like a death knell to the savages.

Suddenly out of the mouth of the canyon poured blue-shirted horsemen, the cavalry guidon flapping its scarlet and white arrogantly at their head as they came down, a regular torrent, and swept into line. The infantry fire turned to the flanks. The troopers were among the Apaches like grim visaged reapers, their sabers and revolvers taking deadly toll.

The last of the Apaches fled into the hills and scattered into the brush as the soldiers came together. First Sergeant Moriarty rode up, the guidon sergeant beside him, and reported as though on parade.

"Sor, 'B' Company prisint and accounted for!" he barked, and saluted smartly.

"Tell me what happened, Sergeant!"

"The captain wint down, sor, and there was no stoppin' for him—we thot he was done for in anny case—so I led the min up thot canyon thot the leftinent showed me the other day! Remimber, sor?—wid the thrick exit on the far ind!

"There was no wu-urrd o' the min wid Leftinent Morton so Oi sinds a messenger out that thrick exit and gits

a man to locate most ov Leftinent Morton's min. They jines us almost immejiately, and says Oi, we'll hole up here until dark and slide out the rear of thot canyon unbeknownst and return to the fort. Whut came of Leftinent Morton, Oi cannot say, sor, the min bein confused on the matther!"

He stared over Sitgreaves' head in the manner of a loyal noncommissioned officer who knows a great deal more than he will say.

"Lieutenant Morton arrived safely back at the fort, I believe," said Doug quietly. "I see you've lost three men and have six wounded. Get them to the wagons immediately. How are you, Captain Newbold?" He turned and rode up to the wagon out of which the captain's red face appeared, heavy with fatigue and worry.

"Is everything all right, Mister Sitgreaves? Yes? Where is that blasted Morton? Wait until I lay my hands on him! Take the company in, Mister Sitgreaves. You've done a spendid task this day and I will make it my business to see that higher authority is apprised of that fact in suitable manner! Ouch!" He sank back in the wagon, with a grimace of pain.

THE column was joyous behind him, the infantrymen in the wagons bragging how they'd saved the skins of the cavalrymen and the cavalrymen calling them "wagon soldiers," which is after all the artillery title.

But Lieutenant Douglas Sitgreaves was morose. Rescuing the captain and pulling the troops out of danger was all very well, but he'd missed out on the biggest and most important thing of all, the capture or killing of the redoubtable Nana, the Apache chief who had taken over Victorio's leadership, and who had already cost the Army and Territorial civilians untold hardship and danger. With Terry the scout, Doug had searched all over the battlefield and the encampment, hoping to find the body of the chief, but without success. Evidently the old fox had slipped away again.

The Apache scout, Nantaje, came up from somewhere. Doug spoke to him in guttural Apache.

"My heart is heavy because we have not killed or captured Nana!" said Doug. The wrinkled old Apache looked at him and shook his head.

"There is no need for a heavy heart. Nana has gone to his fathers!" he grunted. Doug drew in his horse, excited.

"I felt it in my bones, Nantaje! Had Nana the chief been here, the captain and the long knife soldiers would all be dead by now! These Apaches were not led by Nana!"

"How could they be," grunted Nantaje, "when you smashed in his head last night with his own rifle!" And for proof Nantaje brought forth the silver medal with its turquoise center, that was Nana's talisman, and told how he had gone back at dawn and recognized the body on the bluff.

It needed only this to fill Doug's cup of joy to overflowing.

The column of mixed cavalry and infantry and wagons swept into the fort triumphantly. Word came that Lieutenant Morton had been handed an ultimatum by Captain Newbold—to resign or face charges for deserting the men in battle—and that Lieutenant Morton had left, after signing his resignation from the Service.

Doug received word that he was expected for supper at Captain Newbold's and he spruced up and duly reported. It was dark when Marjorie met him at the door.

"Hello, Marjorie," he grinned. "I came along to see your daddy. 'Fraid to call on you, for fear I'd get too familiar—surely did miss my beauty sleep, but I'm going to make it up after tonight. Now, now, little Marjorie, don't take on so! Quit your crying, darling, everything's all right and there's nothing to worry about, at all, at all!"

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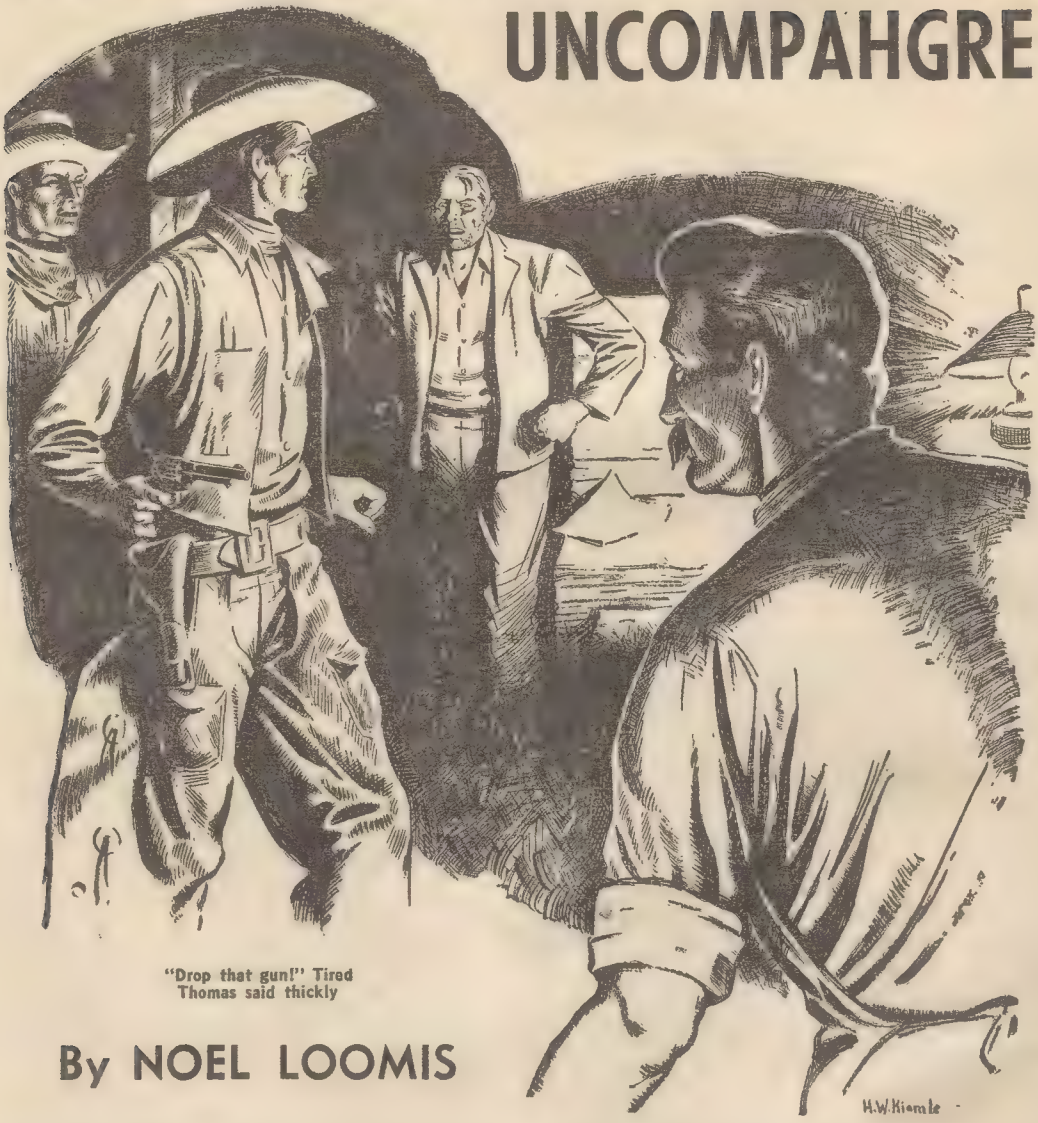


"Drop that gun!" Tired Thomas said thickly

By NOEL LOOMIS

THE sun broke high over the plateau on the east. Its brilliant early-morning light streamed through the recently washed front windows of *The Uncompahgre Union* and splashed across the old G. Washington hand-press.

Frank Hall, the editor, blinked his sleep-heavy eyes and turned loose of the heavy wooden handle by which he operated the lever that closed up the platen of the press against the form of type that lay on its bed. He went up front, past the high twin-case that held the straight-matter type, around the high stool and past the

Newspaperman Hall has a weapon guns can't beat!

counter where they folded papers after they were printed. He reached up to pull down the shade. He had been working all night to get the first run of the *Union* off the press, and the brilliant Colorado sun was too dazzling for him.

With his hand on the shade, he glanced across the street at the big square false front and the sign "BAKERY" across the top in white letters. Smoke was coming from its chimney, black with the resin of pitch-pine. There was no one on the street. Frank pulled the shade down and hurried back to the press. It was imperative that he get the first run off before the town woke up.

He picked up the brayer and hastily ran the little roller back and forth across the ink-stone. Then he turned to the editorial-page form on the iron bed of the press. He ran the brayer over the type and inked the form. He wet down a page-size sheet of paper with a sponge from the bucket of water on the floor. He held the sheet up for a second to let the surplus water drain off; then he laid it carefully on the type-form, laid the platen over it—a pad of large sheets of paper in a frame—and reached for the big wooden lever-handle.

He was working with his back to the front door, but he was so intent on getting the run finished that he didn't hear "Tired Thomas" Thompson suddenly quit snoring on the pile of newsprint behind the display type-cases. Tired Thomas, a tramp printer, had come in the week before from Denver looking for a meal, but Frank had persuaded him to stay for a few days' work. Now Thomas came up, bleary-eyed from sleep and from unaccustomed sobriety.

HE WENT around Frank and stood at Frank's right just as Frank pulled the handle down with a grunt. The lever came down and then to the left and over the hump; it forced the toggle-joint into compression, squeezing the platen or top part of the press down on top of the paper. Then Frank yanked the lever back, relieving the compression. The handle flew up hard just as Tired Thomas opened one eye and ducked back.

Frank started as he realized Thomas was there. "That thing would crack your skull open," he said, momentarily awe-stricken, and then added severely, "Haven't you learned to keep out of the way of that handle yet?"

Tired Thomas yawned. "Depriving my system of alcohol," he said sleepily, "stultifies my perceptions. Anyway, it didn't hit me." He went around Frank to the pile of fresh newsprint and picked up a sheet and held it. His eyes opened wide at last. "Haven't you been to bed yet?"

"No," said Frank, peeling the heavy, wet sheet from the form.

"You musta wanted to get that editorial page printed in a hurry."

"I do," said Frank, laying the wet sheet face down on the pile, and running the brayer over the ink-plate to get a fresh coating of ink. His motions were fast and a little jerky. "I wrote a big editorial on road-building and I want to get it circulated before anybody catches on. We need roads to break up this cattle autocracy out here around the Plateau."

"What," asked Thomas, giving a fresh sheet to him, "does that have to do with staying up all night? You could have done it today, couldn't you?"

Frank sponged the sheet and laid it on the type-form. "You contemplate saying something," he said thoughtfully, bringing the tympan over the form, "and somebody threatens you and warns you not to say it. Then if you go ahead and say it, the other fellow will feel that you flaunted his threat and he may feel impelled to do something about it." He reached for the lever-handle. "You say it first and he may not like it, but he hasn't any right to complain, has he?"

"I guess," said Tired Thomas, "it all depends on who you mean. If it's that Chris Wilkin who was in here the first day I was in town, I ain't so sure."

Frank glanced up at him briefly and then put both hands on the handle and pulled it down. He forced the toggle-joint over on compression and let it stay there while he said to Thomas, "There have to

be farmers and laborers and everything else out here. The cattle kings have their place but they have no right to dictate to everybody else."

"So now you figure on getting out the sheet a day ahead of time, before anybody catches on, so you can stir up the people about roads."

"Sure," said Frank, letting the heavy handle jump back. "Look at Chris Wilkin. He owns a hundred thousand acres of grazing land, and the bank and the general store and the saddle-shop. He can run a man out of town by stopping his credit. That isn't right. That's tyranny," he said heatedly, "and I aim to break it."

Tired Thomas was looking over Frank's shoulder through the window where the shade was not pulled down. "If you were a gun-fighter, Mr. Hall," he said in a low voice, "you could break it now in about two minutes, for Chris Wilkin is stamping across the street from the saloon, and from the way he's throwin' his chaps I'd say he is in high dudgeon and lookin' for bear."

Frank's eyes went wide. He peeled the printed sheet from the type-form and slapped it on the pile. "I will not resort to gunfighting," he said firmly. "The question of roads is for the people to decide."

THE door flew open. It crashed against the wall, and Chris Wilkin thundered in. He was thin, with a way of holding his head back so that his upslanted nose showed his nostrils. He stood in the middle of the floor and glared at Frank. "What are you printing so early in the morning?" he demanded.

Frank Hall was not as tall as Wilkin, but a little heavier. He seemed to tighten up.

"I'm printing the paper," he said, trying not to sound defiant but surprised.

"Early, aren't you?" asked Chris, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt.

"I didn't know," Frank said slowly, "that you kept such close track of my press-days."

Chris scowled. "I keep track of everything that goes on around Uncompahgre," he said. He came past the high stool and stopped at Frank Hall's right elbow. He looked down at the pile of damp sheets, blank side up, and then back at Frank. "You talk too much," he said. "Why did you print that article last week about building roads to Denver?"

Frank stalled. "Why not?"

Chris Wilkin's face got dark red. "We don't want roads in this country. Roads bring nesters."

"Maybe we need farmers," said Frank.

Harshly Chris took a breath. He looked Frank straight in the eye. "Don't print any more stories about roads," he said.

Frank swallowed. He wet his lips and said, "You're telling me what to print in my paper?"

Chris Wilkin said slowly, "I'm telling you what to print."

"You can't do that," said Frank. "The Constitution—"

"The Constitution," Chris said, "applies to Congress. I had my lawyer look that up. Out here on the Plateau I'm overruling it with this." He slapped the six-shooter in his holster. "And if you want to keep on printing that rag," he said sarcastically, "do what I tell you." He turned and stalked out.

Tired Thomas watched him mount his horse in front of the saloon and wheel away. "Drinkin' in the morning don't improve a man's disposition," he observed. "What are you going to do now?"

Frank was sponging a new sheet of paper. "Finish the run," he said doggedly. "I don't want trouble; it isn't easy to make a living out here anyway. But I'm not going to destroy all that newsprint. Paper's expensive. Anyway, I'm tired of being bullied. It's time to take this to the people. Public opinion is the most powerful thing on earth."

"It's a good theory," said Thomas. "Do you think it will work in Uncompahgre?"

"It will if the people are not all scared of Chris Wilkin."

"Are they?" asked Thomas.

Frank looked at him soberly. "I don't know," he said. "You go get some breakfast while I finish the run. Then you can start setting type for the front page while

I go up to the courthouse to get the treasurer's annual report. That has to go this week. It's a good thing too. I'm counting on that to pay my note at the bank."

Thomas was washing. He looked up, with water dripping from his long, stubble-whiskered face. "Maybe you better let me take a quarter," he said.

Frank gave him a coin. "Stay away from the saloon," he warned. "We've got to get the paper out today."

Tired Thomas grinned—a little too wide, it struck Frank. "You can depend on me," he said. "I haven't had a drink in a week."

QUICKLY Tired Thomas dried his face and went out. Thomas was, Frank figured, almost at the end of his sobriety. As soon as the paper was out and Thomas got paid, he probably would get drunk and stay that way for a week. Frank sighed. There was nothing he could do about it.

He printed another hundred papers. Then he took the form off the press and slid it upon the imposing stone. He washed off the ink with kerosene and a rag, but he did not unlock the quoins. He picked up the pile of printed sheets and carried them behind the display-type cases and put them on the floor by the side of the unused paper on which Thomas had been sleeping. He went back and took the thin wooden twelve-point reglet out of the five-pound can of black ink, which was about the consistency of molasses. He scraped the reglet on the edge of the can and laid it on the ink-plate. He hung up the brayer on its nail and carefully put the lid on the ink-can. Then he washed his hands.

By that time Thomas was back. Frank put a handful of copy on the case. "Get this up first," he said. "I'll go get some breakfast and then get that report."

Thomas mounted the stool. He sat up there with his back straight and stiff, and picked up the stick. Frank went out. He went down the street to the cafe and went in. "Eggs and bacon," he said.

The fat cook shook his head. "No eggs this morning. Better have pancakes."

Frank said, "I'm tired of pancakes. I want fried eggs."

The cook shook his head. "There aren't twenty-five chickens on the Plateau. Everybody can't have eggs."

"You can ship them in, can't you?"

"Over what?" asked the cook. "Eggs come from Denver or Santa Fe, and it takes so long on account of the roads, they're spoiled when they get here."

Frank stared at him. "Pancakes," he said after a moment.

The cook poured batter into a big skillet. He popped a mesquite root into the big iron stove. "I hear Chris Wilkin is going to build a toll road across the mountains from Pueblo."

Frank sat up straight. "A toll road?"

"Sure. What's wrong with that? They've got them lots of places."

"Maybe nothing," said Frank, but he was thinking. If Chris Wilkin built a toll road, they might as well stick to the rutted wagon-trails they already had, for Wilkin would put the tolls high for people he didn't like. From Pueblo it would be two hundred and fifty miles to Uncompahgre through the mountains, and Wilkin could set up any scale he wanted. A Conestoga wagon with household goods, for instance, might be a dollar a mile—maybe ten, That would keep out the farmers.

Also an improved road to Pueblo would effectively stop any public building along the old Spanish California Trail, which was actually the easiest way to connect Uncompahgre with the rest of the world, and not much farther even though it led to Santa Fe. The county commissioners would never vote money to reach Santa Fe when there was already a road to Pueblo.

Frank sat up. There wasn't a road. So far there was just talk, but it would make a good excuse. Wilkin could string that along for years.

"You're the editor," said the cook, leaning over the counter as Frank put butter on the hot-cakes. "Why don't you do something about it? Isn't that what a paper is for?"

Frank was startled, because he realized the cook had been thinking the same things. "If I did," he said cautiously, "would you back me?"

The cook drew back hastily. "I'm not going to ride out in front and fight Chris Wilkin," he said. "That's your job."

Frank asked indignantly, "Do you expect me to do it alone?"

"No," said the cook, "but I figure it's up to you to take the lead. You don't have to wait until you're sure of winning, do you?"

FRANK was taken aback. He guessed maybe it was up to an editor to fight for what was right. If he did that, he'd probably get support.

He finished his cakes and went back by the shop. Tired Thomas had set almost a galley of type. Frank went on to the courthouse. He climbed the wide steps to the two-story stone building and went to the county clerk's office. The clerk was a small, bald-headed man, whom Frank had supported in the election.

"Howdy, Frank," he said. "You're here early."

"Howdy, George. Nope, we're supposed to print on Thursday all the time. How about the treasurer's report?"

George Collins looked at him queerly and said, "I'll see." He disappeared for a few minutes. When he came back he was shaking his head. "Guess it isn't ready yet."

Frank frowned. "How can it help being ready? It was passed on by the commissioners last Friday."

Collins looked uncomfortable. "The commissioners haven't decided whether to print it," he said.

Frank thumped the counter with his fist. "They don't have to decide," he said. "That is provided by law. It's illegal *not* to have it printed."

Collins shrugged helplessly. He looked around and saw that there was no one else in the room. Then he said in a low voice, "You got yourself in bad with Wilkin," he said, "over that article on roads you had last week."

"Wilkin doesn't control the county commissioners."

"Doesn't he?" asked Collins.

Frank said nothing. He stared at Collins, taking it in.

Collins said, "Fleming, one of the commissioners, is Wilkin's father-in-law. Bassett's brother is Wilkin's foreman—and Wilkin holds a hundred-thousand mortgage on Rumford's ranch. Isn't that a majority?"

Frank swallowed. "I reckon it is." He moistened his lips. "Well—you mean they're not going to let me print the treasurer's report?"

"I don't know," said Collins, "but it looks that way."

Frank went back. It was obvious now that the commissioners would not approve a road-building program as long as Wilkin was dictating. What would be the future of the Plateau anyway?

He passed the bank. Its gold-lettered name on the window, in formal gothic type, "Uncompahgre State Bank," registered on him. He swung around and went back. Two horses were at the hitching-post in front of the building. Frank went inside. It was dark after being in the sunlight, and he hesitated a moment. Then he made out the wire wicker-work and the two small windows with their marble counter-tops.

He started toward the president's office in the back. But the president, a tall man with thin black hair and a slanting forehead, was coming to meet him. "Something?" he said.

Frank said, "That note of mine is due in about ten days. I wonder if you could extend it for a month. Some income I was counting on is going to be a little slow."

The banker looked at him steadily. "I was hoping you'd be able to make a substantial payment on the due date."

Frank said, "Oh," to conceal the sudden weakness he felt. His eyes were more used to the interior now, and over the banker's shoulder he saw the pointed-nose face of Chris Wilkin. Chris was sitting in a chair before the banker's desk. Frank mumbled something—he never

knew what. He turned and went out.

It began to look like a hard combination to beat. He started back to the shop, but he heard whip-cracking and the groans of a stagecoach. The tri-weekly mail was coming in from Trinidad via Santa Fe. Frank decided to go to wait for the mail. Everybody gathered in the post office when the mail came in.

THE stagecoach driver stopped his six mules. Two passengers got out, and the driver went into the postoffice with a dirty gray sack over his shoulder.

Frank followed him in. The cafe man was there with his apron thrown up over his shoulder; the harness-maker was there, and a dozen others. Chris Wilkin came in with jangling spurs. He looked at Frank sardonically while knots formed at the corners of Frank's jaws.

Chris could not resist gloating. He came over and asked, "Am I causing you any trouble?"

Frank looked at him hard. "You and I will have a showdown some day," he said stonily.

Chris Wilkin pretended to look Frank over. "If you had a gun we could—but you don't carry a gun, do you?" He spoke with an obvious sneer. "The West is a little too rugged for you, I guess."

Somehow Frank kept his voice level. "I believe honest differences of opinion can be settled without gunfighting," he said. "It is only when one man is determined to have his own way that gunplay is necessary."

Now Wilkin's face turned red, but he took a parting shot. "Out here," he said, "we don't waste time with a lot of talk, but we get things done."

Frank said no more. He also thought there was too much talk. As soon as the mail was put up, he got his handful of letters, wrapped them up in the exchanges, and started up the street. Halfway, the hardware man called to him, and Frank went inside the hardware shop.

"I got in a shipment of wallpaper Monday," the hardware man said, "by freighter from Las Animas. I want you to run a little ad for me; but don't say anything about the price. It's a little high." He said apologetically, "It's the freight, you know."

"I know," said Frank. He made some notes on the back of an envelope, thanked the hardware man, and went on to the shop.

Tired Thomas wasn't there. He must have stepped out. Frank rolled up his sleeves and went back to the display cases to set the hardware man's ad. It would have to go on the front page, and he thought he'd make it two columns by two inches. That should not be too much, at fifteen cents a column inch.

He got the ad finished and picked it up by opposite corners and carried it over to the front-page form. He set it down at the bottom of the page and pieced out the brass column rule above it. Then it struck him that Tired Thomas had been gone quite a while. He glanced at the case where the tramp printer had been working, and his eyes opened wide. There was only one galley and one stickful of type. Thomas had quit setting type a few minutes after Frank had left the office.

Frank remembered the silly look on Thomas's face that morning. Thomas had been ripe for a drink. Frank groaned. Thomas must be asleep on the pile of newsprint now. Frank put his imposing rule in his pocket and went to the rear of the room with long strides. He'd get Thomas on his feet and sober him up enough to get up two more galleys of type. Then he'd give him five dollars and tell him to get out.

He rounded the display case. Thomas wasn't asleep on the pile of paper. Thomas wasn't back there at all, but the five-pound can of ink was. There wasn't much ink left in it, for somebody had poured the ink over the six reams of newsprint on the floor and over the three hundred and forty papers Frank had just printed.

Frank was aghast. He stepped gingerly across the empty can and leaned over. The reams of paper were festooned on both sides with ink that had run down the edges. His first thought was that he could

wipe off the ink and put the reams in the paper-cutter and trim them. He found a small clean spot and tried to pick up one ream. Then he discovered that the ream had been held up and riffled while ink was poured into it.

His hope was gone when he turned to the pile of half-printed sheets. He lifted them. They too were smeared with ink between the sheets. They were ruined.

HE STUMBLED back. He could not get more paper without cash for payment, for nobody would ship paper that far into undeveloped country without cash. He couldn't borrow from the bank; he knew that without asking. Anyway, it would take too long to get it from St. Louis for that week. He had some letter-head-size paper, but there was something about the law on legal newspapers that required them to be the same size every week. He looked around the shop. He'd had a ream of full-size bond but he had cut it up. There was nothing in the shop anywhere big enough to print the *Union* in its legal size.

The word "legal" jarred him, and an instant later he knew why. If he should miss a week's issue he would no longer be the legal newspaper for Uncompahgre County. Ordinarily that rule was not strictly enforced, but certainly it would be with Wilkin controlling the board of county commissioners.

Frank felt sick. If he lost the legal printing, he could not exist. Legal printing was half of his small business.

He climbed up on the high stool and sat there and tried to think. He was still sitting there when Tired Thomas came staggering in. Thomas smiled that loose grin and said, "Good morning, Mishter Editor. Want a new subscription?"

Frank glared at him and said disgustedly, "Go soak your head."

Tired Thomas tried to take offense. He stuck out his stubble-covered chin, but it wasn't very effective. "I just went out to get a little drink," he said as if he was hurt.

Frank thought of the newsprint and said, "Tell me all about it."

"Two cowboys came in and gave me two dollars for a two-year subscription. They offered me a drink, and I didn't want anybody to say the *Uncompahgre Union* lacked appreciation of the finer points of hospitality, so—"

"So you took them over to the saloon and bought them a drink," said Frank.

Tired Thomas hung his head. "I guess I spent the two dollars, Frank," he said. "You can take it out of my wages."

"While you were playing host," Frank said sarcastically, "somebody poured the ink-can over the newsprint, and there's nothing to print the paper on."

Tired Thomas straightened like a ludicrous picture of wrath. "They can't do that to the *Union*," he proclaimed.

Frank said, "You've been all over the country. Have you got any ideas?"

Thomas looked exaggeratedly thoughtful. "During the war," he said, "I was in a shop where they ran out of newsprint and put out the sheet on wallpaper for a couple of weeks. Now let me see. Where was—"

But Frank was off the stool. "Wallpaper!" he shouted. "Why not? Go back there and hold your head under the pump and get yourself sobered up enough to set type."

But Tired Thomas shook his head. "I can't sober up once I get started—but I can set type, drunk *or* sober. Put a bottle of White Mule on the case and I'll show you some typesetting that *is* typesetting."

He got up to the case. He wavered a little on the stool, but he picked up the stick, shook his head a couple of times, and then his fingers began to fly.

Frank was astonished. He never had seen typesetting like that. He went across the street and got a quart bottle of whisky, opened it and set it between the twin cases. Tired Thomas took a long pull at the bottle, smacked his lips, and set type faster than ever.

FRANK got busy. He went to the hardware store and bought two rolls of wallpaper. He couldn't print on the

colored side but it didn't matter. He put the editorial-page form back on the G. Wash, sat down with a pair of scissors and the two rolls of wallpaper—they both had roses on the outside—and began to cut it into page size.

At dinner-time he took a chance and sent Tired Thomas out for sandwiches and coffee. He thought the man would come back as long as there was whisky in the bottle. He did. "That is beautiful," Thomas said, looking at the wallpaper sheets. "Especially the roses."

Frank finished the run. He got up to the ten-point case and set a double-column editorial attacking the "one-man government of the Plateau." He put that in the two center columns at the top of the front page. Then he made-up the page. Tired Thomas had set enough type by suppertime, so Frank gave him the rest of the bottle and told him to kill it. Thomas retired to a corner and devoted himself to following instructions.

Frank did not stop for supper. He worked with feverish intensity, determined not to stop until the papers were safely in the postoffice.

He printed three hundred and forty copies of the editorial page, and it didn't look bad. Then he put on the front page and printed three hundred and forty of that. He assembled the sets and folded them. He wrote a name from the mailing-list at the top of each front page. Then he tied them into a big bundle with the fuzzy rope that had come around the newsprint.

It was two o'clock in the morning. He left the light on and went quietly out the back door. Thomas was asleep. Frank went to the post office and knocked on the rear window. Presently the postmaster, grumbling, opened the door and took the bundle.

Frank went back feeling relieved. He had the edition in the postoffice. The rest was up to the U. S. mail. Fatigue flooded over him. He turned out the light and locked the door. He went to his curtained-off living-corner in the back next to the newsprint. He was so tired he lay on the cot without undressing, and was instantly asleep. . . .

He was awakened by pounding on the front door. He got up, rubbed his eyes, and went to open it. Collins, the county clerk, was there, and he was excited.

"The people are holding a mass meeting in the hotel lobby," he said. "They read your editorial telling how you had to print on wallpaper because somebody ruined your newsprint. They sent a delegation to the commissioners to demand action, but the commissioners turned them down. Now they're talking about a necktie party for Chris Wilkin."

Frank was wide awake instantly. "A hanging!" he said. "They can't. I'll go right away."

He went out into the bright sunlight of the Plateau. Somehow things were different. There was a changed feeling in the town. He walked down the rattling wooden sidewalks with Collins at his side, and by the time they reached the hotel they had a group trailing behind them.

The lobby was packed. The fat cook at the cafe was talking. "It ain't right for one man to run everything," he said. "We can't even have eggs because of him. He runs the commissioners and they won't build a road until he gives the word. I say we go talk to Wilkin—with a rope."

The crowd cheered, but Frank Hall pushed through them. He got to the side of the fat cook and got up on the hotel clerk's desk. "Men," he said, "it's a bigger fight than just a fight for roads. It's a fight for good, honest government that will do things honestly and legally. So let's start out by making our demand the same way."

"Speak your piece," said the cook sullenly. "But I think with Chris Wilkin out of the way we'd have nothing more to worry about."

"We don't have to hang him," said Frank. "I suggest we have a mass meeting tomorrow morning in the courthouse. I'll print some posters and we'll distribute them tonight. That'll serve notice, and nobody can say we tried to do anything illegally."

"That's the right way to do," said Collins.

THE crowd agreed, and Frank drew a deep breath of relief. He went back to the shop. Tired Thomas was still asleep, sitting on the floor in the corner, holding the bottle by the neck.

Frank had some big wooden type for a heading, "Mass Meeting," and he had enough wallpaper left for a newspaper-size poster, but he didn't have enough big type to set the text all in the same face, so he set it in several faces. He called a meeting for ten o'clock the next morning to serve demand on the county commissioners for action.

It was supper-time again when he was ready to start printing the posters. He was famished, and he didn't think even Chris Wilkin would dare to interfere with the mass meeting, so he locked the door and went to eat.

When he came back it was almost dark. He lit the kerosene lamp and set it on the imposing-stone. He scraped the ink-can for enough ink to run the posters. He got the form on the press and inked it. He wet a sheet of wallpaper and laid it on the form. He put the tympan over the sheet, reached up and grasped the big wooden handle with both hands. He brought it down with a grunt. The lever forced the toggle-joint onto compression. Then he heard the front door kicked open.

His back had been to the front. Now, with the lever down on compression, the sound of the door, slamming back against the wall, startled him. He turned his head to look.

He had guessed wrong on Chris Wilkin. The man was striding in. His face was inflamed and his walk unsteady. He was obviously drunk, and his head with its sharp nose was thrown back at a greater angle than usual. He walked toward Frank, and his eyes were deadly.

Frank saw then that the doorway behind Wilkin was filled with silent, watching men. A quick glance told him the windows were occupied too. Wilkin, then, had been making public threats. That was bad. A man would do more to support his own talk than he might otherwise.

Wilkin reached him. He stood so close that Frank could smell the liquor on his breath. "The fancy editor," Wilkin snarled, "who doesn't carry a gun." He made a motion toward his own. "You been trying to run me out of the country," he said with a snarl. "Now I'm running you out. We don't need any nosy editors and we don't need a rag like yours to make trouble." A big six-shooter appeared in his hand. Its muzzle was almost in Frank's stomach. "I know why you don't carry a gun," Wilkin went on. "You're afraid you might have to fight. Well, look, Mister Smarty. That excuse doesn't go any more. I say when a man takes the place of a man he should be treated like a man. And I figure you've been talking loud like a man. Now *get 'em up!*"

Frank swallowed at the sight of the gun centered on his chest. He turned loose of the lever-handle and started to raise his hands. But an unexpected thing happened. The lever, released of the pressure of Frank's arms, allowed the toggle-joint to go off compression. The toggle-joint went off with a snap that forced the lever-handle to jump through its return arc. It went up and over and cracked against Chris Wilkin's temple. Wilkin reeled a moment. Frank watched, wondering if he should try to snatch the gun. But Wilkin straightened. There was a glazed look in his eyes but he raised the pistol and his finger started to tighten on the trigger.

But a new voice came from the rear of the shop—the voice of Tired Thomas Thompson. "Drop that gun," he said thickly, "or I'll let you have it between the eyes."

WILKIN'S gun-hand went a little limp. This time Frank did not waste the opportunity. He snatched the gun and tossed it in the ink-can. Then he turned.

Tired Thomas was coming out into the light. Frank could see a circle at his waist

that looked like the muzzle of a gun. Then Thomas came into the yellow glow from the kerosene lamp. His sandy stubble was twice as long, his blue eyes were twice as bleary. His clothes were more disreputable than they had been—and he was holding the empty whisky bottle so the neck was aimed at Wilkin.

"Go on home," he said thickly, "and get yourself a sugar-tit."

Somebody guffawed at the door. Wilkin's eyes blazed. He started for Thomas, but the cook's voice stopped him from the door. "Hold it," the cook said. "I've got a gun too and I'm a little nervous on the trigger. Git out of here, Mr. Wilkin, and go home quick before I pull too hard."

Wilkin headed for the door. The crowd opened a passage for him. He walked through. And then they laughed at him. He cursed them furiously, but they laughed.

Frank took the first poster off the typeform and stuck it to the wall inside the door with a pin. The crowd came in and gathered around. The cook read it aloud.

"You're a mighty fine writer," the postmaster said to Frank. "I read your editorial."

"All I want," said Frank, "is good government."

"You've practically got it already," said the postmaster. "When they laugh like that at a man, his power is broken. He'll fight back, sure, but it'll be a losing fight. The commissioners will side with the people."

Frank, remembering his note, said gloomily, "Banks don't work that way, though."

The postmaster said, "Sure they do. Bankers ride the band-wagon like everybody else. When you're up, they're with you. You've got nothing to worry about, Mr. Editor. You're up from here on in."

Frank felt pleased. Pleased and a little weak. "I guess," he said, "it's the first time the fate of a whole county depended on a couple of rolls of wallpaper with roses on the back."

What Readers Think of TEXAS RANGERS

Excerpts from Recent Letters

Your stories are really the best ever written. They're good because they leave an impression on you. I just can't wait for the next story each month. I was cleaning out my attic, and came across your issue of December, 1946, with the novel entitled THE NESTERS' FEUD. I read it over about five times. How about another story like that? And you know something, artist Parkhurst should draw up more pictures of Hatfield and Goldy. One thing I noticed, the cover never shows Goldy's mane as black, which it should be. But don't forget, run another story like THE NESTERS' FEUD. Jackson Cole CAN write it.—*Mrs. E. O'Connor, Elberon, N. J.*

Have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for a long time and think it is swell, Jim Hatfield is one of my favorite characters. He is good at almost anything, but I have never read a story where he rolled a cigarette with one hand Seems to me as if he could do that.—*Donald G. Huffman, Walhalla, N. D.*

Few magazines carry the kick and all-around quality of TEXAS RANGERS, which is a grand book and getting better all the time. I do not confine myself to the novel, but read the shorter stories also, and I find them especially good. Your magazine has a pretty complete reading feast for the story-hungry fan, and I certainly appreciate every issue and every page of it. Keep up the good work.—*L. M. O. Janes, Madison, Wis.*

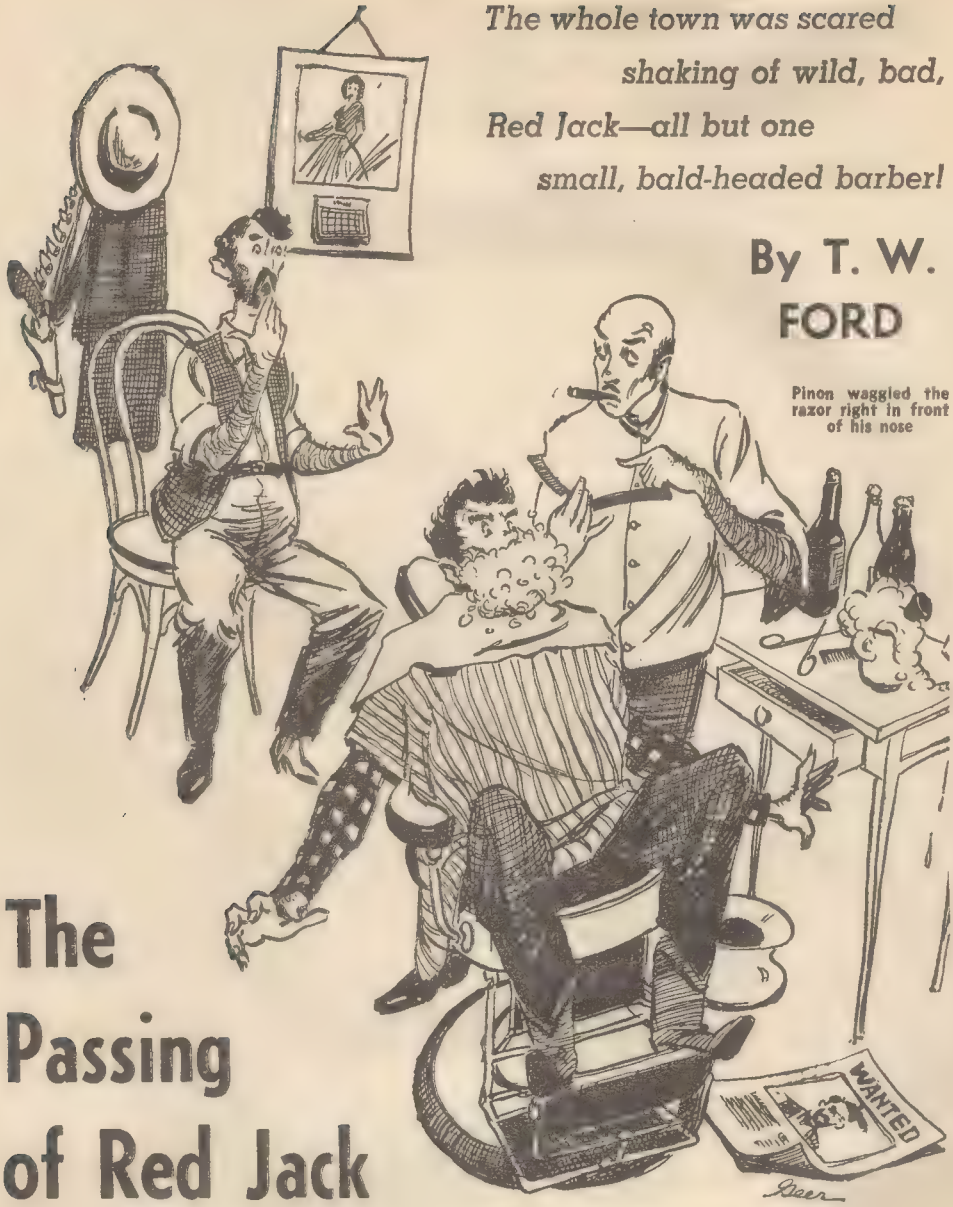
What has happened about the controversy as to whether Jim Hatfield should have a girl friend or not? Interest seems to have died down—but I want to go on record as being in favor of the girl friend. After all, it's love that makes the world go 'round and why should Jim Hatfield be immune?—*Edward G. Flonot, Seattle, Wash.*

I would like to have a picture of Jim Hatfield and of Goldy for my room. I am waiting until you get a picture on the cover that will strike my fancy, and I will cut it out and frame it. That ought to tell you how highly I regard your yarns.—*Morris Morbliss, Chicago.*

I enjoy your novels but your short stories often leave me cold. However, the magazine as a whole is to my taste. Would like to see more animal stories among the shorts.—*J. J. Devinne, New York City.*

The whole town was scared shaking of wild, bad, Red Jack—all but one small, bald-headed barber!

By T. W. FORD



The Passing of Red Jack

TOOK FULLER had hired his new barber just two days before Red Jack swung into little Hayden Flats.

Took didn't believe in hiring a bald assistant if he could help it. Said somebody in the shop ought to have a good head of hair or the customers might figure it was catching and stay away. Took was as bald as a turkey egg himself. But his last assistant had been a dour, quick-tempered man who scowled at the customers and answered any conversational attempts with a curt "Yes" or "Nope." When, the Wednesday before, one of them had complained about his haircut, the assistant had clamped on his hat and

walked out the door. He hadn't come back.

The one before him had been a sneak drinker, slipping up to his room above and taking quick snorts. The day, half orey-eyed, he shoved a brushful of lather in dozing Judge Pentnor's open mouth was too much. Took had to fire him.

So when this new man drifted into town—Jim Pinon, he called himself—Took had taken him on despite the fact he had a skull as bare as a mossless rock. Another few days it would be Saturday and the cow outfits would be in. There would be too much work for one man to handle.. Jim Pinon hadn't been on the job an hour when Took Fuller realized he had a top-hand barber working for him.

PINON was just under medium size with a quick quiet way of moving. He'd be standing next to you at the rack where the private shaving cups were before you knew he'd left his chair. You'd turn around to reach for a fresh towel and he was holding it out under your nose.

He had a small sharp-jawed face, an expressionless face that would have been tough to buck at a poker table. He could put an easy smile on it too when he greeted a customer. But Took saw the face go dead, the faded blue eyes go as frosty as frozen creek water when the dealer from *The Eldorado*, half orey-eyed, threw a coin at him. Pinon didn't pick up the coin, even after the dealer had gone out.

The new assistant could really shave a man, not with scraping, laborious strokes either. His hand moved quickly, surely, the razor passing over the face in smooth tracks. A customer sat up in the chair afterward, patting his face and smiling, with no burns or nicks in his skin. Pinon was deft with the shears too, turning a man out of the chair neatly clipped in half the time Took himself needed. It nettled old Took some at first.

But he got over that quickly when he discovered his new man didn't drink. After they closed, Pinon had gone down to Joe Chang's eating place. When Took came down from his quarters above later, the new man was sitting on the front steps smoking a stogie. Took had invited him down to Charlie Nichol's barroom for a drink.

"Thanks, boss," Pinon said. "I don't use the stuff." When he finished his cigar, he went upstairs to bed.

The one thing that baffled Took was the small black locked leather case the new man had among his belongings. Took always believed in having a look at a man's gear, his satchel if he had one, at the first opportunity. Said you had to be careful about what kind of a gopher you might have working for you. A quiet look at his possessions, especially if there were any letters, helped you tell. Jim Pinon had come in with a little package. It contained, Took found, a couple of shirts, some clean underwear, socks, a pair of run-over boots—and this small black case. The lock on it was strong.

Took wondered about that case. He hinted around some the second day. But he knew he'd never dare go any further. There was something about this Pinon gent, amiable as he was, that kept a man at arm's length.

The third day Red Jack Pine hit town. Word came that he was down at Nichol's place, drooping a horn and proddy for trouble. The whole town tensed. Nobody wanted to cross him. His reputation was too well known as a crack gunman who'd never been beaten to the draw. He'd followed the owlhoot for years, once rodded a big bunch of his own.

But even riding solo, he was something to be feared because of his very daring. He had held up the Alamogordo Cattlemen's and Drovers' bank singlehandedly. On another occasion he had robbed the Las Cruces stage, when it was well guarded, by the sim-

ple trick of riding as a passenger. Repeatedly he had defied capture, seeming to smell traps baited for him. And the toughest John Laws had no desire to jump him face to face. His gun wizardry was too well known.

Yet Red Jack Pine had killed but two men in his career. One was another lobo who tried to double-cross him. The second was a bounty-hungry gunslinger, hired to clean up a pueblo, who jumped him from behind. He was so deadly fast, he often didn't have to pull trigger. He had the other hombre covered before he could touch gun butt.

He had been caught finally, sentenced to the Big House for a term. A couple of months back word had drifted down the line that Red Jack was out though he had been sent up for life. Another story followed that he had escaped.

A little while later word came along the trail that he had been in Wagon Wheel, next in Stirrup City. He had terrorized both places, swaggering and liquoring up and browbeating gents, the typical gun bully. In Wagon Wheel he had put lead in the leg of a man he bearded into going for a gun. They said that Stirrup City had paid him to get out, he had caused so much trouble and spread so much fear. Now he was in Hayden Flats. The town held its breath, praying he'd move along to fresher, lusher fields plumb soon.

There was a screech from down the road by Nichol's place. Old Man Lester was getting a shave in Took's chair at the time. He jumped up so fast to get to the front window he almost lost an ear. Jim Pinon was already in the doorway.

They were just in time to see a little middle-aged gent picking himself out of the ragweed of the gutter. In the doorway of the barroom stood an arrogant figure, red head bared by the sombrero that lay back on his shoulders. He held the little gent's stovepipe hat, extended it. The little gent edged around fearfully, wary about coming closer. The red-headed one slung the stovepipe hat into the horse trough out by the hitchrail. His guffaw rang down the road before he turned back inside.

"Real ornery customer, that Red Jack Pine, ain't he?" said the new barber.

Along the sidewalk across the road, strapping on a gunbelt hastily, bigbellied Marty Preacher, the Justice of the Peace, heaved himself along. He turned into Nichol's place with obvious reluctance. A little later, Old Archie, the swamper from the barroom, came along past the barbershop.

"Hey, Archie, what did Marty tell him?" Took called.

Archie paused in the doorway, rubbing one of his rheumatic legs. "What did Marty tell *him*? He-he! You should of heard what Red Jack told Marty! Called him a wind-bellied goat 'n a few other things, then made Marty buy him a drink."

Took remembered afterward how Pinon's eyes had flickered strangely once. "Ain't there anybody with nerve enough to stop him?" he asked. "Mebbe a small bunch—"

Took said, "Mister, even in a bunch, somebody has to be in the front rank. And they'd be marching with one foot in the grave. Everybody knows Red Jack Pine is fast as a ghost with a gun."

IT WAS early in the breathless afternoon when the shots came from the barroom. The gun reports spattered on the quiet of the town like staccato imprecations. A man came through the batwings of Nichol's place as if the devil was grabbing at his coat tails. He galloped down the line and dived into the alley of the livery barn. Half a minute later, one man emerged leading another along. The second one was bleeding from the head where he'd been clipped by a gun barrel.

Pinon said to Took Fuller, "I always knew this Red Jack was a gunfighter—and plumb poison to tangle with. But this beating up helpless peaceful gents who wouldn't have a prayer if they drew against him. . . ."

Took shrugged. "They say Red Jack Pine has gone plumb mean since he came outa prison."

Charlie Devers came in and propped a chair against the wall and borrowed the makings from Took and settled down for some jaw wagging. Charlie was the town gossip. He said Joe Labe at the bank and some of the other older men were talking about sending a man up to the county seat and having the sheriff come down with a posse.

"With him in town, it's like having a mad dog running around loose. Now was I the peace officer in this town, I'd—"

Then Red Jack in person marched in the door. . . .

He was a medium-built man with oversized shoulders and a thick chest beneath the red shirt. His sombrero was shoved back off a shock of flaming wild red hair. The wide face was stamped with a savage bellicose look accented by the light blobs of bulging stupid-staring eyes.

"I aim to get me a shave," he snorted, kicking one of Charlie Devers' outstretched legs as he strode past. He paused to stare down at wizened little Charlie as if he were a bug he might squash.

"'Scuse me," Charlie mumbled, pulling his feet in hurriedly under his chair.

Took had ducked through the curtain into the back room as if he had important business there. But Jim Pinon, the new man, stood serenely beside his chair, holding the cloth to put around a customer's neck. Red Jack unbuckled his double gunbelts with their big white-stocked Patterson Colts and hung them on a small hook. He batted Charlie's hat off the second

[*Turn page*]

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chair and put his own sombrero on it even though there were two more empty seats. Then he swaggered over to Pinon's chair, the bug eyes raking the new man up and down.

"I'm danged particular about how I get shaved, mister. I'm a-warning you now," he growled, blowing out whisky fumes strong enough for a man to hitch a horse to. "Cut me—even nick me just once—gopher, and I'll send you high-tailing it down the road with a slug in your tail feathers! Sabe?"

As Took told it afterward, Pinon's smile was as sweet as sorghum. "Yes, siree," he said quietly. "We aim to please."

Red Jack opened his thin-lipped mouth to speak again. Pinon dabbed at the corner with a brushful of lather. Red Jack snapped his mouth shut. Pinon lathered him up well, worked it in with his fingers, then applied another layer of sudsy soap. The next moment he was going past Took, peeking from behind the curtain and up the stairs to his little room in back. When he came down again he carried something wrapped loosely in a red bandanna. He carried it carelessly and dropped it in the drawer under the shelf in front of his chair. He left the drawer half opened.

"Where the hell you been?" Red Jack started to snort. "I ain't got time to hang around a two-bit barber shop all—"

"Yes-siree. Going to use a special razor on you, my friend," Pinon cut in softly. "It's one I keep for real important customers." With a flash of the blade, just before Red Jack's bulging eyes, he cut in half a hair he held in his other hand. "This is a real sharp razor, friend. I wouldn't want you to stir a whit in that chair, please."

"Well, you better—"

"And don't talk, friend. Slightest movement of the face now. . . ."

He was going down one side with his swift, long stroke. And Took

hadn't missed the steely sharpness in his voice when he told Red Jack not to talk.

But Pinon talked as he proceeded with the shave. "Hear that Red Jack hombre, the gunfighter, is headed this way," he started to ramble along. Red Jack's eyes switched to him in amazement. "Just come on the job," the new man explained. "New here. That coyote oughta be hung on sight. I'd sure give a pretty penny to pull the rope myself, too. Steady there, now. Almost got the edge of your nose, friend. This razor is sharp as something honed in Hell."

THERE was no sound for a couple of moments save the sound of the blade against the rough stubble of beard. That and the reclining Red Jack's stentorian breathing. In the chair against the other wall, Charlie sat petrified, the sweat running down his seamy face. Took's legs were shaking behind the curtain. He wondered if his new man had gone locoed.

"Yes-siree, that Red Jack Pine is a lowdown mangy critter a self-respecting sidewinder wouldn't share his hole with, by grab! I got a sneaking respect for some outlaws. But not this Red Jack! He's buzzard stuff—he'd pick on a down cow, I believe."

There was an upheaval beneath the cloth over Red Jack's body. Pinon waggled the razor right in front of his nose.

"Mister, I warned you before. You just gotta stay still while I'm using this special razor." He raked it with an almost careless sweep across the upper lip. "I believe you're the plumb nervous type, friend." He took the blade back to beneath an ear to come down the jaw line. "Fella like you'd never make a real gunfighter. I can see that, now. And I seen real trigger slammers in my time, friend. Men like Pete Monger of Alameda. An' Tombstone Charlie Pease. Then there

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was the Angel Kid, Eddie Weems. By grab, how that boy could scrape a fiddle! And he'd hit the trigger as fast as you could spit. But them, they was *real* gunslingers—not like this windy tinhorn, Red Jack Pine! Say, mister, are you choking or something?"

He leaned over to get at the far side of Red Jack's face. "Why if they shot down that Red Jack and left his carcass a-laying out on the trail, I don't believe even the buzzards would touch him! That's my honest belief, now. I think they'd sooner eat a six-months dead mule, by gram! Hey, keep still, friend! I danged nigh lopped off your ear when you jumped then! Now . . ."

The razor came down just beneath the jawbone on the other side, slowly though. "Ooh-h! Thought I'd gotten you then. By heck, this sure is a sharp blade, friend." He turned and apparently picked something off the shelf. "See this hair, friend?"

Red Jack's eyes twisted. The water leaked out of the pores of the lather-free portions of his big face. Then his eyes almost jumped out of his head as the blade sliced down past his face.

"There! Cut it in half true as a whistle." Pinon bent over his customer, smiling. But from back there by the curtain, Took saw there was something different about that smile now.

"You know what I'd do, friend, if I had Red Jack himself in this chair right now? Easy, friend. You sure oughta learn to relax more. Easy. I gotta do the throat now. . . If I had Red Jack in this chair 'stead of you, I'd—" He paused, the razor firmly against Red Jack's windpipe. "I'd cut his throat just like I was slaughtering a hog for smoking! Zz-zut-t! Just like that!"

Prone in the chair, Red Jack's hair seemed almost like live flame. It was the contrast with his sheet-white face.

"And you know what I'd do if he tried to make a play, friend?" Pinon didn't seem to move hurriedly. But he

was over there by the gunbelts on the wall hook, hand on one butt. "I'd have him dead to rights, wouldn't I, friend?"

In the chair, staring at the reflection in the mirror, Red Jack made a gargling sound. But he was edging his right hand under the cloth.

"And if I even saw him start for a hideout gun, friend, I'd blow out the back of his head with one of his own hoglegs! Wouldn't have no more compunction about it than I'd have in beating off the head of a sidewinder with a club! *Less*, by jinks! Here, let me finish up that throat of yours." He was back, smiling down, sweeping the gleaming blade in with a magnificent flourish.

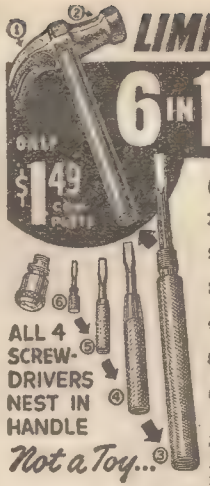
It was so still Took could hear the tick of the watch in his vest pocket. It was like living in a nightmare. He could hardly believe the new man was such a doggone fool, was so dumb he hadn't realized this was the notorious Red Jack Pine. And when the killer got out of that chair. . . .

"Bet you got high blood pressure, friend." The razor glided up the throat a second time, paused right over the jugular. "You oughta see a pill roller. None in this pueblo, of course. But was I you, I'd ride right down to Jackson Wells today and see that fella there. You don't take care of yourself, I'm predicting you won't live long, friend."

There was a sucking sound as Red Jack's heavy nostrils drew in air. Then Pinon was wiping him down with the towel, stepping back.

"There we are! Nary a scratch. But if I'd had that yellow-livered four-flushing Red Jack Pine in my chair—" He shook his head, put down the razor and pulled open the little drawer a bit more as Red Jack pushed himself to his feet. The red bandanna covering that little package he'd brought from upstairs was flipped back. It revealed a gleaming, well-oiled short-barrelled .38.

[*Turn page*]



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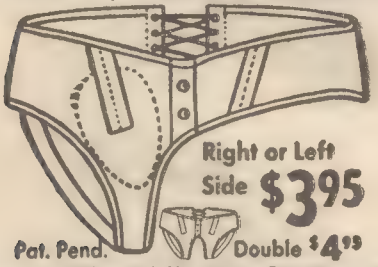

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RED JACK moved over to his gun belts on the hook. Took realized he didn't walk very steadily, as if his legs had suddenly become weak. Pinon stood there with a hand resting carelessly on the drawer, holding the bill Red Jack had handed him. There had been no talk of change.

"Now take it easy, friend. You sure are the nervous breed. Was I you I'd slope outa town pronto—and mebbe see the doc at Jackson Wells."

Red Jack lifted his hardware down.

"And if you should run into this Red Jack, friend, tell him I said I don't think he'd have the nerve to draw against a gent who wasn't afeared of him. And, by grab, *I ain't!*"

Red Jack fumbled as he buckled on his shell belts. He pulled his hat on. He stood, side turned to Pinon, chest heaving as he breathed hard. There was a slight rattle as Pinon shifted the .38 around in the drawer. Red Jack nodded at nobody in particular, grunted something, and walked out.

Charlie Devers let his tilted chair slam forward. "Well, I'll be danged! I'll be a—"

Took half ran from behind the curtain. "Pinon, what in tarnation—"

Jim Pinon was lighting up one of his stogies as he stood in the front window. "Wait," he said quietly.

They didn't have long to wait. They watched Red Jack go down the main drag, turn in at the livery barn. A few minutes later he came riding out. He turned the chestnut's head westward past the blacksmith's barn, crossed the creek bridge, and rode out of town.

"Reckon I'll get myself some grub. Past lunch time." Pinon picked up his hat and went out.

When he came back a little later, he stood for some minutes staring up the long grade to the northeast that slanted down from Squawman Pass. Took squinted through the front window. Two riders were coming down the long hill. One of them, he saw,

wore a flat-crowned flat-brimmed gray sombrero and forked a calico pony. Pinon came into the shop, nodded to his boss, and went upstairs.

The two riders moved into town at an easy lope. They had hardly pulled up when a small crowd gathered around them, including Marty Preacher, the justice of peace. Took hurried out, shears in hand. The man in the gray hat, he saw, wore a Federal marshal's badge pinned to his chest.

"He's a marshal—looking for Red Jack," Charlie Devers informed Took.

"Red Jack Pine got bluffed outa town—and by a barber, too, by dang!" Took sang out proudly, pushing forward. "He—" He wanted to tell all about it.

The flat-jawed marshal looked down from the saddle. "That so? Are you sure, mister?"

"Saw him leave with his tail 'tween his legs with my own eyes," Took crowed. "He came into my place for a shave an'—"

The marshal cut him off. "Didn't happen to have a new barber lately, did you, mister?"

"Why sure. That's what I'm trying to tell you. He was the one who hurrawed this Red Jack, scared the daylights plumb outa him, an'—"

"This new barber, is he a bald medium-sized fella, soft talking?"

"Sure, that's him. Jim Pinon. And the best barber—"

"That's my man, that's Red Jack." The marshal swung out of the saddle.

But when he and Took Fuller went up to the little room over the shop, there was no Jim Pinon. And none of his belongings either. He had gone.

"Flown the coop on me again," the marshal said, going down the stairs. He didn't seem very sore about it, though.

"But this Pinon was bald as an egg," Took insisted. "And this red-headed Red Jack was in town—"

"That so-called Red Jack is just a

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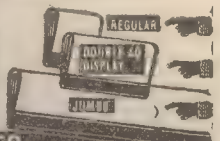

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cheap impostor," the marshal explained as he lighted up a quirly in the now crowded shop. "A cheap bully who goes around cashing in on the real Red Jack's rep. We know about him."

"Pinon ain't been gone long," Charlie Devers said. "You could catch him yet."

The marshal shrugged. "Haven't got any charge on him. He was pardoned by the governor after he saved six men in a fire at the State prison. Been going straight ever since. We just wanted to ask him some questions about a former saddle pard of his." He smiled thoughtfully. "But Red Jack never was the kind who'd give evidence against an old friend. Well. . . ."

"But this Pinon was bald, I tell you!" Took insisted.

"So is Red Jack Pine—the real Red Jack. He always used to wear a red wig—he was very sensitive about that baldness when he rode the owlhoot. Thought more of that wig than he did of his own right arm, they say." He sighed.

Then at last, Took knew what had been in that little black case.

"He sure was one danged fine barber. Sure hate to lose him. . . ."

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